



Youth Work as Social Research

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Editorial

Dr Tina Salter, YMCA George Williams College

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In this inaugural issue, the papers reflect some of the sessions delivered at the first yresearch conference at the YMCA George Williams College in February 2015.

The first two papers tackle the theme of youth work practice as a way of carrying out research, due to the skills and experiences of practitioners being able to engage with young people in meaningful ways. The arguments are put forward based on two different studies. The first by William Mason draws on his PhD research as a way of putting forward the case for more rigorous research to help inform the development of youth work practice. He specifically makes the case for 'participant action research' as this methodological approach lends itself to youth work values and practice. Mindful of the limitations and potential difficulties using this model, he discusses how these barriers can be overcome in order to ensure the research process is ethical and effective.

The second paper is born out of a five year longitudinal study carried out by Ken Harland and Sam McCready in Northern Ireland. The study itself used a mixed methods approach to explore masculinity and the experiences of young men in schools with a view to better understanding what causes underachievement. The participant young men completed questionnaires, attended focus groups and experienced youth work interventions where masculinity and identity were further explored. The research methods used were underpinned by youth work practice. This involved taking a relational approach and using a range of youth work tools and activities in order to effectively encourage participation from the young men. These methods helped demonstrate to the young men how their experiences and views were valued. The authors argue how youth work as a research methodology used within a school context can help enhance the opportunities that young people might have to share their thoughts and feelings; particularly when they may not get many other opportunities to share in this way at school. The two approaches can be complementary and create broader learning opportunities for young people.

The theme of collaborative research is the focal point of Naomi Stanton's paper. She describes how a piece of research carried out by the Home Office, YMCA George Williams College and Navigator Research, was in turn delivered in a collaboratively way involving young people and practitioners. With the aim of producing a practical toolkit to support youth workers and schools engage young people in the topic of organised crime, this paper

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seeks to demonstrate how research can be used to drive practice forward, by including young people and professional workers in the research process.

Martin Allen and Patrick Ainley's paper presents extensive research which has been carried out looking at the apprenticeship system in the UK, how these have been positioned by recent governments and used in practice. These findings are compared with the policy and delivery model used Germany, with arguably higher success rates. They posit where mistakes have been made with approaches adopted by the UK and suggest what needs to happen in the future to ensure that young people are better served by these programmes.

The fifth paper has been written by Liesl Conradie who is a senior lecturer in child and adolescent studies at the University of Bedfordshire. As part of her doctoral research she examined the nature of interaction between youth workers and young people through social media sites. Her findings suggest that some youth workers adhere to certain boundaries which prevent them connecting with young people online. Others do so but limited to professional or organisational accounts. A third group view their role as more than professional – particularly youth work volunteers or professionals who have lived for a long time within the community in which they practice. These different views on online social interactions with young people have different results and are also viewed in a variety of ways by the young people themselves, whose perspectives were also considered in the research. Liesl concludes that more needs to be done in understanding and thinking these issues through, which in turn needs to inform policy and practice.

These papers snap-shot of some research being carried out in the field of youth and community work, at a particularly difficult time when many youth services have either significantly diminished or simply do not exist. Whilst the landscape has shrunk, those left are showing a determination to capture and evidence the work which represents a long history of creative and meaningful engagements with young people. yresearch hopes to continue providing evidence of youth and community work.

Tina Salter
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A Critical Case for Participant Action Research in Youth Work

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Abstract

This paper presents a critical case for participant action research in youth work. Drawing on reflections from a doctoral study that explored the everyday experiences of youth workers and marginalised young people the paper demonstrates a number of benefits to be drawn from participative research engagement, alongside outlining some key ethical and methodological challenges. Centrally, this paper considers the value of developing a stronger and more participative research community in youth work, bringing practitioners and academics closer together in the pursuit of needed innovation in practice.

Key words: Participant Action Research, Youth Work, Innovation

Background

The contemporary UK youth policy and funding landscape presents significant challenges for youth work. The election of the Conservative led Coalition Government in 2010 arguably marked the acceleration of an already widening schism between policy makers and youth workers concerning the nature and purpose of youth work practice. Austerity, coupled with a political ideology that is highly individualised and instrumental in its approach to ‘fixing’ those who are perceived to be ‘broken’ or ‘troubled’ has fostered an increasingly targeted and interventionist approach to the provision of youth services reliant on state support. This approach is at odds with the principles of inclusivity, voluntary engagement and informal education that constitute the foundations of youth work (IDYW, 2012). The challenges and contradictions that this context poses, for secular non-uniformed youth work, are well documented (Axford, 2015; Jeffs, 2015; Mason, 2015; Melvin, 2015; Davies, 2011). For example, youth workers are: tasked with the aim of empowering young people at the same time as controlling their behaviours; expected to sustain high quality and innovative services in the context of diminished and diminishing resources; and under increasing pressure to evidence and measure the outcomes of practice. Indeed, the measurement of outcomes in youth work has become a central point of contention within contemporary youth work debate, particularly that concerning research.

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In 2011, a cross-party Select Committee on Services for Young People cited the dearth of 'objective evidence' for the impact of services as a 'historic and continuing problem' in the youth sector (House of Commons, 2011:18). This report set a clear research agenda, articulating the prioritisation of measurable impacts for the justification of youth work funding. The report also provoked broader debates about the relationship between youth work, research and policy. In particular, the primacy awarded to quantifying youth work 'impact' raised serious questions about political expectations and understandings of youth work, alongside raising a great deal of scepticism towards research aiming to produce evidence of outcomes. For example, Spence and Wood (2011:8) have argued that youth work research should be 'critically understood with reference to the political context in which it is generated and used'. More recently, Jeffs (2015:82) has criticised calls for 'research into what youth work does and achieves on the part of universities and consultants', arguing that such calls reflect an impoverished understanding of the field whilst almost certainly being motivated by self-interest. Jeffs (2015) has gone on to suggest that if secular non-uniformed youth work is to have a future, then those invested need to steer their efforts away from 'objective' research agendas towards more effective means of identifying what youth work can do that other institutions cannot - towards carving out a unique and justifiable role and purpose (Jeffs, 2015). To achieve this, Jeffs (2015) suggests that youth work needs to innovate, developing new forms of civic practice that might:

1. Seek out innovative forms of engagement marrying philosophical reflection with political and social action;
2. Look to new ways of meeting the wider educational needs of young people (which the increasingly narrowing curriculum is failing to deliver);
3. Facilitate the fostering of closer intergenerational relationships between adults and young people; and,
4. Provide a counter weight to faith-based youth work and schooling.

Jeffs' (2015) article presents a useful contribution to contemporary youth work debate. This is because it signposts areas where youth work has a unique potential to contribute to the support and social development of young people. Building on Jeffs' (2015) work, this paper considers the role of research in the pursuit of these aims. The paper contends that research should play a central role in youth work innovation, providing that it is grounded in the perspectives and concerns of youth workers and young people, taking the development of practice rather than the measurement of outcomes as its point of departure. Due to restrictions of space, this paper does not present a comprehensive overview of participative methods; material of this nature is presented elsewhere (Goodson and Phillimore, 2012; McIntyre, 2008). Instead, the central aim is to outline the value of developing a stronger and more participative research community in youth work,

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bringing practitioners and academics closer together in order to develop knowledge that can contribute to needed innovation in practice (Jeffs, 2015). This is grounded in the recognition that effective and critical youth work necessitates ‘an engagement with and development of analytic and research-based knowledge and skills’ (Bradford and Cullen, 2012:2).

The paper is organised into four substantive parts, starting with a brief explanation of what is meant by participant action research (PAR). The discussion then goes on to consider the benefits of such research in youth work, detailing four key points born out of the author’s own research experience and a close reading of relevant empirical and methodological texts. Following this, a critical consideration of some key challenges facing youth work researchers is presented, considering also some of the ways in which these challenges might be addressed. Finally the paper concludes with some practical recommendations for those interested in participative youth work research, alongside a note on the value of developing a stronger research community in the field of youth work.

What is PAR?

Action research is a community-based approach that emphasises ‘awareness raising, empowerment and collaborative investigation between trained researchers, professionals and lay people’ (Bowling, 1997:366). The approach is commonly used to critically investigate services or social situations, with a mind to improving them. Action research is also often participatory, in that it is geared towards planning and conducting research *with* rather than *on* those people whose life worlds are under study (Bergold & Thomas, 2012).

There are many different labels for research that is participative and action-oriented (Dick, 2010). For reasons of space and clarity, only the two most relevant will be introduced within this section: Participant Action Research (PAR) and Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR).

PAR is an approach that is committed to sharing power and resources in order to work towards beneficial outcomes for all participants (CSJCA & NCCPE, 2012). This is guided by the methodological principles of reciprocity and reflexivity. Reciprocity is a strategy ‘used by feminist researchers to challenge the hegemonic principles of traditional, hierarchical research’ (Huisman, 2008:374) and is based on the belief that researchers and participants should benefit mutually from their engagement in the research process. ‘Reciprocity is intertwined with the value of reflexivity’ (Huisman, 2008:374) – another feminist principle denoting the need for researchers to reflect critically on issues of power and positionality throughout the research process.

McIntyre (2008:3) has identified four underlining tenants specific to the field of PAR:

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- a) *A collective commitment to investigate an issue or problem;*
- b) *A desire to engage in self and collective reflection to gain clarity about the issue under investigation;*
- c) *A joint decision to engage in individual and/or collective action that leads to a useful solution that benefits the people involved; and,*
- d) *The building of alliances between researchers and participants in the planning, implementation and dissemination of the research process.*

This approach has gained increasing importance as a community based strategy within qualitative research (Bergold & Thomas, 2012). However when PAR is conducted specifically by or with communities, it tends to go by a different name: Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR).

Banks and Armstrong et al (2013:265) have argued that the growing popularity of CBPR can be understood in the context of ‘national initiatives to promote stronger engagements between universities and a range of publics’. Other explanations for the growing popularity of CBPR include the utility of the approach for accessing groups deemed ‘hard to reach’ and the value of gaining experiential knowledge from communities of practice. Recently, activist sociologists have also promoted forms of CBPR as a means of broadening the reach of sociology beyond academia, as evidenced by McKenzie’s work (2015a; 2015b). Innovative and arts based methods often characterise these participatory approaches. For example, Emmel and Clark’s (2009) ‘Connected Lives’ research drew on walking tours, participatory social mapping and diary writing exercises to investigate social networks and neighbourhood communities. More recently, Harland and McCready’s (2014: 272) research with young men in Northern Ireland utilised youth work interventions involving ‘small group work, work in pairs, kinaesthetic approaches, artistic expression, storytelling and role playing’ to encourage discussion and participation. Other participatory methods include qualitative interviews, focus groups, photography and film making (see for example Ahmed et al, 2007).

There is considerable overlap between PAR and CBPR. As Banks and Armstrong et al (2013) have pointed out, most PAR engages with communities and as a consequence, discussions of CBPR often apply equally to PAR. What distinguishes the two is that ‘for community research projects a *fundamental requirement* is that community researchers belong to, or at least share common ground with the intended participants’ (Goodson & Phillimore, 2012:7 *emphasis added*). This is not necessarily the case in PAR. This paper chooses to use the term PAR to refer to participative research that is action oriented *and* community based, recognising also that research collaborators might not always belong to the communities that constitute the research focus. The following argument posits that PAR is an ideal medium through which to tackle some of the current challenges facing youth work, particularly in terms of innovation (Jeffs, 2015). It also contends that youth workers

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are well positioned to collaborate in PAR, because youth work and PAR share many of the same ideological principles - attention to reflexivity, positionality, rapport and power relations have all been cited as areas of commonality between youth work and participatory research (Gormally & Coburn, 2014). Furthermore, the fact that youth workers are highly proficient in their ability to investigate the experiences and circumstances of young people suggests that, as Featherstone et al (2014: 72) have argued for social work, 'in many important ways, professional practice *is* research'. This suggests that youth workers are in a position of strength from which to undertake participative research that is action-oriented and fundamentally committed to 'increasing understanding and knowledge in terms which are appropriate to the values of youth work' (Spence & Wood, 2011:10).

Why PAR?

The following discussion briefly details some of the ways in which PAR could contribute to the production of knowledge necessary to inform innovation in youth work (Jeffs, 2015). This is not an exhaustive list, but it is grounded in observations from empirical research that aimed to explore the everyday experiences of youth workers and marginalised young people. This research took place in and around three open access youth services across two disadvantaged urban settings in a northern city. These services catered for young people (aged 11–19) and were principally attended by Somali and Pakistani males. Youth/community workers and young people were closely involved in the planning and design of the research, enabling the study to comprehensively examine both the needs and opinions of young people and the challenges facing service providers in the communities where the research took place. Throughout the ethnographic field work (06/2010 – 09/2014) 26 youth workers and young people engaged in in-depth interviews and focus groups and detailed field notes were collected for analysis. All names have been anonymised in accordance with conventional ethical procedure.

Reflective practice

The first point in favour of PAR concerns reflective practice. Productive innovation is dependent on critical reflection. This is a definitive characteristic of youth work practice (NYA, 2014; Davies, 2010). Gormally and Coburn (2014:876) have argued that 'in youth work practitioners [should] reflect on their engagement, their values and their interactions with young people and how their values and dispositions may have impacted on those interactions'. Throughout the research that informs this discussion, attempts to integrate reflective practice into youth work characteristically took place during the team meetings that followed youth club sessions. These meetings were short, lasting somewhere between 5 and 10 minutes, they were routine and they principally focused on the behavioural issues encountered during sessions. However, this focus, necessary as it was, routinely distracted from critical questions about the experience, impact and outcomes of professional engagement. Youth workers very rarely conversed reflectively in the way that Gormally and

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Coburn (2014) recommend. Ironically, it is also arguably (at least in part) the routine and habitual nature of these meetings that compromised their ability to provoke effectively reflexive dialogues. As Bauman and May have identified (2001:10):

When repeated often enough, things tend to become familiar and the familiar is seen as self-explanatory; it presents no problems and may arise no curiosity.

This research observed that the everyday realities of youth work compromised the achievement of critical practice. In this example depleting resources limited variation in and between sessions, which provoked workers' and volunteers' feeling that there was nothing to be reflective about, beyond the behaviours of young people on the night. A central tenant of critical sociological research is defamiliarization (Bauman & May, 2001). Defamiliarization involves asking challenging questions about routine and 'common sense' matters, a perspective that PAR is ideally positioned to achieve because of its emphasis on self and collective reflection (McIntyre, 2008). Engaging in critical research that *defamiliarizes the familiar* creates a space where participants can be deeply reflective, in the same way that this research prompted respondents to identify limits in their own reflective practice. PAR therefore, can contribute to reflective practice at a time when reflexivity is otherwise difficult to achieve. This is also at a time when, more than ever, the space for critically reflective dialogue is needed in order to 'address the wellbeing of workers as a preventative to the risk of burnout' (Hughes et al, 2014:5). Without reflective space youth workers are unlikely to be able to uncover, share and operationalize innovations in practice.

Invigoration through participation

Engaging in PAR can introduce creative activities into youth sessions. This is particularly important within the contemporary context where youth services are largely under financed. Youth workers and volunteers from this research often voiced frustrations about their inability to plan innovative sessions. This was because, for the most part, staff were only paid for session delivery, not planning. Reduced funding also meant that all three of the facilities involved in the research were limited in their capacity to provide activities for attendees beyond the conventional pastimes: table tennis, games consoles and pool. In some instances these difficulties compromised youth work relationships, particularly where youth workers failed to deliver on promises to organise activities. This is demonstrated by the following extract, taken from a focus group with regular youth club attendees:

Halimo: ... you know most of the stuff that these youth workers say we're gonna do, we never do it.

Shirwaz: They said we were gonna go go-karting.

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Halimo: But yeah, they said yeah, we were gonna have basketball tournaments, we're gonna do this, we're gonna do that, but we haven't even done one thing that they said.

Researcher: So do you find that that happens a lot then?

Halimo: Yeah, it happens all the time, that's why we never trust this youth club. We just come to stay out of trouble.

Productive youth work relationships balance, often precariously, on trust and respect (Mason, 2015; Davies, 2010). In this research, trust was seriously undermined when promises to organise activities did not come to fruition. This usually occurred because of an intersection of factors including: the challenges of simultaneously coordinating session planning and delivery, the failure to secure funding for activities and the level of bureaucracy that could need to be negotiated in order to realise even simple activities. For example, during the field work it was observed that one barbecue in a public park took nearly three months to organise. Collaborating with researchers in PAR can bring new energy, ideas and resources into youth services, albeit temporarily. Participating in research projects can also give young people a sense of ownership over a set of activities (McIntyre, 2008) alongside producing new contexts to foster positive intergenerational relationships (Jeffs, 2015). In this respect PAR engagement can help to invigorate youth club sessions at a time when this is otherwise very difficult to achieve.

Political engagement

Young people's political engagement is a matter of increasing public concern (Henn & Foard, 2013; Furlong & Cartmel, 2012). Recent research from the UK has suggested that when asked about politics young people often respond negatively, implying that politics is 'boring' or 'for old people' (Pilkington & Pollock, 2015). Further evidence suggests that the level of disinterest and political cynicism voiced by young people could well relate to disconnections between political processes and young peoples lived experiences (Pollock et al, 2015). Involving youth workers and young people in the design and production of research that speaks directly to their own experiences, through a focus on local youth services, could therefore help to foster new forms of political engagement, developing intellectual spaces for the marrying of critical reflection with political and social action (Jeffs, 2015).

Community engagement is currently at the forefront of public policy interest. Goodson and Phillimore (2012) have situated this within the context of shifting levels of responsibility for services, from the state to the private and community and voluntary sectors. For example, the 2010 *Positive for Youth* policy paper stressed the responsibility of local authorities, communities and businesses for the organisation and delivery of youth services (CO and DfE, 2010). Existing research programmes evidence the appetite for community level approaches to public engagement (see for example www.connectedcommunities.org).

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These shifts have brought community based methods new relevance and esteem, largely because community based research can help to:

...bridge a gap between community members, who often lack understanding of the policy process and ways to shape service delivery, and government agencies that often have little understanding of the implications of policy interventions at grass roots level (Goodson & Phillimore, 2012: 10).

Youth work has a rich history of political mobilisation and engagement. This suggests that youth work professionals are in a strong position from which to explore forms of engagement that can capture the interest of young people, particularly those deemed 'hard to reach' (Banks & Armstrong et al, 2013). PAR with its emphasis on informing change is an ideal medium through which to explore and document the utility of youth work relationships and approaches in the pursuit of more inclusive political engagement.

Understanding young people

The fourth point in support of PAR concerns broader contributions to knowledge around the everyday lives of young people. As Thomas (2011a:190) has highlighted 'the rush to produce evidence about what youth work does to young people [runs the risk] of ignoring the valuable insights as to what it enables us to *know* and *understand* about young people'. More than any other professional group, youth workers have a unique ability to tap into 'ways of understanding the world young people occupy and the nuances of youth cultures' (Jeffs & Smith, 2010:2). Because of this, youth clubs are often chosen as research sites and youth workers often contribute greatly to researcher's engagement with young people (Thomas, 2011b; Valentine & Sporton, 2009; Alexander, 2000; Back, 1993). Reflecting on the value of recognising what youth work research enables us to know, Thomas (2011a:30) has also argued that 'drawing on such knowledge can help to avoid very expensive and counter-productive social policy mistakes on both a macro and micro level'. Youth work, for example, has been at the forefront of the implementation of policy priorities such as multiculturalism and community cohesion. Listening to the voices of youth workers and young people can contribute to the development of more informed and operational youth policies alongside enhancing understanding of wider contemporary societal issues through the study of youth cultures (Thomas, 2011b).

There are numerous benefits to developing a stronger research community in youth work, both immediate and long term. Where secular, non-uniformed youth work is in need of innovation to survive, PAR offers a medium through which youth workers, academics and young people can collaborate in the investigation and identification of youth work's unique roles and strengths. To be clear, the contention here is not that PAR is a 'silver bullet' that can solve the intersection of issues facing youth work, but it is an avenue worthy of exploration with a mind to pursuing innovation in practice. Reflective practice, invigoration

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through participation, fostering political engagement and more broadly understanding the lives and perspectives of young people are likely to be just some of the potential PAR benefits that could contribute to innovation within the sector at the same time as enriching what is already exists within it. However, in recognising these possibilities it is also important not to adopt a naively optimistic stance.

PAR challenges

Both practically and methodologically there are challenges to the effectiveness of PAR in youth work. The discussion now turns briefly to some of these challenges outlining issues that research collaborators might face.

The main criticisms of PAR concern issues of ethics and power. Structural inequalities inevitably shape all research (Huisman, 2008) and as Banks and Armstrong et al (2013) have highlighted where professional researchers collaborate with community partners community control and equal partnership is much less likely to occur than professional control with elements of community participation. Indeed, both the extent and meaningfulness of participation varies greatly across and within participative studies, depending often on the quality of research relationships and the commitments of collaborators. Power relations and issues of commitment therefore can centrally challenge PAR. Clark et al (2012:48) have argued that inviting participation automatically introduces power imbalances within research because ‘it assumes that one group is in a position to encourage the participation of another’. Where co-researchers are offered consultancy payments from host institutions, questions are also raised around co-researchers becoming the employees of universities. The nature of participation is also often challenged at the point of research dissemination. This is because conventional academic outlets are often less accessible to participants, either due to journal subscription costs or academic jargon. Gormally and Coburn (2014) have referred to this issue in terms of a distortion of the primary client in research. For example while researchers maybe committed to gaining the voice of youth workers and young people if that research is written in a conventional academic style then the primary client becomes the host institution who benefits from the paper over the research participants (Gormally & Coburn, 2014:882). In order for PAR to function according to the principles set out above by McIntyre (2008), researchers need to demonstrate a genuine commitment to the communities of interest. This requires a reflexive commitment to inclusive participation throughout the research process, which can be both time consuming and labour intensive for researchers and participants (Clark et al, 2012).

Practical issues such as time and money can also compromise commitment. Researchers, youth workers and young people are likely to have various commitments beyond research activity. For example, the youth workers involved in this research were committed to staffing sessions at the same time as engaging in qualitative interviews and focus groups.

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Many of them also worked at least one other job when they were not convening youth sessions. In practice, this made interviews and focus groups very difficult to organise and convene without disruption, because data collection could often only take place during youth club sessions. In order to be effective therefore PAR needs to be flexibly designed in order to encourage participation. In the context of youth work, this means designing activities *with* youth workers that can fit into already existing sessions. However, where youth workers are already overworked and underpaid this is likely to be challenging.

Finally, it is also important to recognise that the challenges outlined all rely on the formation of participative research relationships in the first place. Gaining access to participants and research sites is not always straight forward. In fact, this was one of the most difficult aspects of the research informing this paper. This is because the youth work managers who acted as gatekeepers to research sites already felt ‘over researched’ and dissatisfied by experiences of journalists and university researchers conducting ‘hit and run’ studies (Begun et al, 2010). Indeed, the vibrant urban settings where many youth services are based tend to be attractive places to conduct research, so lots of research happens within them. According to Clark (2008:956) claims of being ‘over researched’ should be read as an ‘overt expression from communities that they are tired of participating’ in research ‘and no longer value the experience or any of the associated outcomes’. This is a condition known as ‘research fatigue’. Drawing on empirical data from in-depth interviews with social science researchers, Clark (2008) identified a number of precursors to research fatigue. These include: a lack of perceptible changes attributable to research engagement, increasing apathy and indifference toward research engagement and practical causes such as cost, time, and organisation. All were familiar to the youth workers engaged in this research. They are also likely to be familiar to other youth workers and young people who have had underwhelming experiences with researchers. Bearing this in mind, prospective youth work researchers (from academic and community settings) should approach research partnerships carefully and critically, with a focus on ‘the daily practice of negotiating the ethical issues and challenges that arise’ through the life of participative research (Banks & Armstrong et al, 2013:266).

Conclusion

This paper has presented a critical case for participant action research in youth work. Building on Jeffs’ (2015) recent work, it has argued that research should play a central role in the development of necessary innovation in practice. By paying attention to some of the issues that might face collaborators in PAR the argument has also signposted some key challenges concerning research relationships between academic researchers and youth workers. However, the contention is that where participative studies can be organised in a way that foreground ethics and critical reflection throughout the research process, these challenges can be negotiated and outweighed by benefits. In 2012 the Centre for Social Justice and Community Action (CSJCA) at Durham University and the National

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Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE) published a guide to ethical principles and practice in community-based participatory research. This guide offers a number of useful points for consideration on preparing, executing and disseminating PAR in youth work. The following summary introduces some key practical considerations, for further detail readers are advised to consult the guide.

Preparing and Planning In the preparatory stages of PAR it is important to arrive at a clear set of expectations concerning research aims and involvement. Collaborators might therefore consider engaging a 'preliminary phase of checking out expectations' (CSJCA & NCCPE, 2012:9), paying particular attention to who should be involved in the research, the reasons for working together and the aims and objectives of the study. Having a frank discussion about the value and purpose of collaborative research engagement can reduce the chances of conflicting agendas emerging throughout the research process.

Doing the Research Establishing an open working agreement about how to work together in participative research can equip collaborators with the tools necessary to challenge unequal power relations. Indeed, particular attention needs to be paid within participative research to negotiating power (Banks & Armstrong et al, 2013). Working agreements might consider: protocol for communications (including when and where meetings might be held), protocol for safety, protocol for handling conflict, details of the research methods to be used, details of available funding, details of any training required, practical issues concerning research responsibilities and agreed ethical principles regarding: researcher integrity, relations with and responsibilities towards participants, anonymity, privacy and confidentiality and relations with and responsibilities towards funders (BSA, 2002).

Dissemination The capacity of PAR to influence positive changes largely hinges on the dissemination of research findings. Where research is participative it is important to involve collaborators in the dissemination process. This can help to ensure that research findings are disseminated inclusively, with ecological validity. During the course of the research, or once the findings have been drawn together, the research team might therefore wish to critically consider how to share the research, how to make an impact, how to implement the findings in order to drive change and how to produce useful outputs from the research.

Consideration should be given to ensuring that any reports or other products of research are made accessible to other researchers, policy-makers, service providers, community members and organisations for future use. Additionally it is important to ensure that the skills and knowledge gained by all of the partners is capitalised upon in further research or action projects (CSJCA & NCCPE, 2012:11).

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Finally, it will also be important for research partners to consider the ethics of disengagement and the termination of research relationships. Ensuring that research partnerships end on good terms is likely to enhance the chances of research benefits continuing into the future, alongside reducing the provocation of research fatigue.

The considerations outlined by the Centre for Social Justice and Community Action and the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement (2012) demonstrate the importance of transparency and regular consultation throughout PAR. This paper has argued that where critical and reflexive attention is paid to the power dynamics that are structured into research relationships PAR has the potential to contribute to the discovery of needed innovation in youth work. Of course this is an optimistic position and the challenges facing youth workers in terms of time, energy and resources will complicate the formation of research activities. However, providing there are still youth workers, students and researchers committed to the development of practice, there is room for collaboration and progressive research engagement, and this is important. Indeed, as Jeffs (2015) has argued, achieving innovation requires facing up to the intellectual challenges of unearthing it.

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Youth Work Methodology as Social Research?

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Abstract

The article discusses youth work methodology as an underused and underestimated method of data collection in carrying out social research. The paper draws upon the findings from a five year longitudinal study carried out by the Centre for Young Men's Studies at Ulster University. The fieldwork was carried out annually in nine schools across Northern Ireland with a single cohort of 378 adolescent boys aged 11-16. The study aimed to provide a methodology where the voice of boys and young men, in their natural settings, would be central to the research process and produce the types of data that would best reflect the social reality of their everyday lives. The paper also highlights the importance of having a well thought out dissemination strategy that is informative, interesting, challenging, interactive and engaging for the listeners, while resisting telling others what to do.

Keywords: Youth work methodology; longitudinal study, social research, Taking Boys Seriously, Centre for Young Men's Studies

Introduction

This article discusses the design, implementation and dissemination of longitudinal research (2006-2012) carried out in Northern Ireland by the Centre for Young Men's Studies at Ulster University. The Centre aims to promote the voice, needs and interests of boys and young men through research that will inform practice, training and policy. The study was jointly funded by two Northern Ireland ministries (Department of Education and Department of Justice) and was initiated in response to concerns about boys' educational attainment and wider concerns about their health and well-being. The research culminated in the publication of 'Taking Boys Seriously' (Harland & McCready, 2012) which provides a detailed overview of the findings and recommendations emanating from the study.

In this paper we focus specifically on the methodology that underpinned the research, the dissemination of the findings and an exploration of some of the challenges and opportunities of carrying out research with boys and young men. In particular, we present

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youth work methodology as an effective, yet to date, underestimated method of carrying out social research.

Research strategy

A 'mixed methods approach' (Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007) was used to collect and analyse data, integrate the findings and draw inferences using both qualitative and quantitative methods.

The specific objectives of the research were to:

- Identify factors that may contribute to boys' academic underachievement and look for practical ways to address this;
- Determine the value of education to boys and explore how a school can become a more positive learning experience;
- Test out Non-formal educational approaches to working with boys;
- Understand male transitions through post primary school; beyond post-primary school to higher education/work and factors that impact upon future employment aspirations; and their transition from boy to man;
- Examine how experiences of violence in a post-conflict society impacts upon the education and learning of boys.

These objectives were investigated through identifying and exploring the social, physical, psychological and emotional well-being factors of boys during their five year experience of post-primary education.

Ethical approval

While the main goal of our study was to find credible answers to our research questions, this is only acceptable if the questions asked protect the identity and well-being of those who would participate in the study (Teddie & Tashakkori, 2009:198). Six months prior to the study commencing an application was submitted to Ulster University's Research Governance Ethics Committee. Governance of research in Ulster is defined as setting standards; defining mechanisms to deliver standards; monitoring and assessing arrangements; improving research quality and safeguarding the public. This is a thorough and extremely useful process that enabled the research team to reflect critically upon issues such as confidentiality, consent, methodology, research questions and researcher bias. Ethical approval was attained and this scrutiny gave the research team confidence in the mixed methodological approach.

Participants and sampling

In the year preceding the longitudinal study (2005) we piloted our questionnaires and focus group approach in a number of primary schools, youth clubs and community locations. This enabled us to sharpen our formal qualitative and quantitative data

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collection methods as well as alerting us to some of the issues and feelings from boys and young men in this area of study.

The fieldwork of the longitudinal was then carried out in nine schools across Northern Ireland. Schools for inclusion in the study were selected from the Department of Education's school database according to school type and location. Five schools were within the top 80 out of 890 most deprived Social Output Areas of Multiple Deprivation. The participating schools represented a mix of urban and rural, secondary and grammar, controlled and maintained, integrated, all-boys and co-educational. A single cohort of 378 boys aged 11-16 contributed annually to the study. Participating schools received a letter containing a brief description of the study and consent was sought from parents and participants. These forms needed to be completed in the affirmative for a participant to take part. Consent forms were returned to the key contact teacher in each school and those who returned the forms committed to taking part in the study. All participants were debriefed verbally about potential issues arising from the research. Participants were also given an information sheet of approved support contacts for young people.

Research grounded in social reality

The world can be a 'messy place, full of contradictions, richness, complexity and disjunctions' (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011:219). Those studying the lives and experiences of young people face a number of complexities in regard to producing the types of data that best reflects social reality (Salvin-Baden, 2013). This was a major consideration for the research team in carrying out this longitudinal study. From the outset we wanted the study to capture the reality of boys' and young men's everyday lives and experiences and focus on what they considered to be important relating to education and their well-being. The study aimed to provide a methodology where the voice of boys and young men, in their natural settings, would be central to the research process. We also wanted a methodology whereby young men would be encouraged to talk honestly about their experiences without feeling judged for what they said. We were aware from previous experience that young men may be reluctant to talk about certain issues or feel pressure to say things that they believed the researcher or practitioner wants to hear (Harland, 1997). As part of our overall research strategy, we devised a youth work informed research methodology that would enable us to meet our desired goal of listening to boys and young men and capturing their voices. Both authors had many years' youth work experience as practitioners, trainers and researchers and appreciated the way in which youth workers engage and work with young people in a relational-driven way that better understands their everyday issues and concerns. Despite this experience however, we were also aware that, to date, little consideration has been given to the potential of youth work methodology in shaping and informing social research.

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What we mean by a youth work methodology?

The authors of this piece are youth workers at heart. For us the central purpose of youth work is educational and the work is concerned with personal and social development. The processes we create to deliver this work are therefore designed to foster learning, and the activities, programmes and processes through which youth workers engage with young people are the means, not the ends, of youth work.

We are both citizens of Northern Ireland and our professional careers have been formed and carried out here. In Northern Ireland we see youth work as *non-formal education* and this is a partner to *formal education*. Within education vocabulary a tripartite categorisation of learning systems has emerged. That is formal education, informal education and non-formal education (Combs with Prosser and Ahmed, 1973). Education is a broad concept and is an alliance between the *formal (schools)*, the *informal (family, leisure time, peers)* and *non-formal (other educational activity e.g. youth work)*. A young person will only spend around 16% of their time in school (Harland & McCready, 2014). It is this belief in what youth work is and our own experience that has enabled us to refer to a youth work methodology and thus apply it in our approach to data collection for this research.

A youth work methodology (see McCready & Harland, 2013) first and foremost is about a critical, relational-driven encounter with young people. It meets young people on their own terms and endeavours to enable young people to garner knowledge and meaning from their own experiences and ideas. It is characterised by a specific value system relating to social justice that helps to distinguish it from other approaches to learning. A youth work methodology sees young people as an asset, not a problem, and is concerned with how young people feel. A youth work methodology works *with* young people not *on* them. It is about creating safe learning environments that engage, stimulate and motivate young people while supporting them to explore fears, aspirations and their lives. Therefore, while the study utilised a creative and mixed approach combining quantitative and qualitative research methods, it was underpinned and informed by this youth work methodology.

As part of this youth work methodological approach we set up a steering group of 12 young men from Youth Action Northern Ireland's Young Men's Forum to provide ongoing feedback and direction to our study. This steering group was made up of young men from a variety of backgrounds who were active as youth volunteers in their respective communities. Members included those representing young fathers, individuals working with boys and young men at risk of anti-social behaviour, and those working with excluded boys and young men living in rural areas. The input from the Young Men's Forum enabled the research questions to better reflect the diverse range of adolescent male experiences and ground the research team in boys and young men's lives .

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Data collection and analysis

Data collection comprised of questionnaires, focus groups, semi-structured interviews with teachers, a case study of an all boys' school and, what we called, youth work intervention sessions (i.e. ice breakers, themed exercises and group discussions).

The study was led by research staff within the Centre for Young Men's Studies, including the authors of this paper. Data collection was carried out in partnership with YouthAction Northern Ireland's Work with Young Men's Unit. Being aware from previous studies that some boys and young men may be reluctant to talk about certain potentially controversial issues (e.g. Harland, 1997), initial training was delivered to the youth work team on data collection skills for focus groups as a form of group interviews based on interaction with the group (Cohen et al, 2011) and the youth work methodology. This process built on each youth worker's facilitative group work skills and encouraged them to probe and tease out conversations with the young men. The research was also supported by Trefor Lloyd (Associate of Centre for Young Men's Studies at the time of the research) who carried out interviews with teachers and undertook a case study in an all boys' secondary school.

Questionnaires

Six questionnaires with different themes were used to collect the quantitative data. Two were scientifically tested questionnaires and four were designed by the research team:

- The KIDSCREEN Quality of Life questionnaire for adolescents (Rajmil et al, 2004);
- The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) (Goodman, 1997) was used to assess emotional and behavioural issues;
- The About Me questionnaire - background and family information;
- Questionnaire enquiring about school experiences, preferences, post-school aspirations;
- Being a Man questionnaire exploring perceptions of 'masculinity and what it means to be a man';
- Violence Questionnaire seeking to understand how adolescent males conceptualise their perceptions of violence and their personal experiences of violence, being in trouble and bullying.

The questionnaires were administered each year of the study during one visit to each school in May or June. The Quality of Life and Strengths and Difficulties questionnaires have good reliability and validity scores that can be compared with available UK norms. They are also acceptable for a wide range of purposes ranging from screening to diagnostic analysis (Woods & White, 2005). The School Experiences questionnaire, Being a Man questionnaire, and Violence questionnaire were developed in conjunction with young men from our steering group. Our previous research experience, ethnographic study (Harland, 2000) and pilot research (Beattie et al, 2006), enabled us to design our

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questionnaires to take account of any literacy problems or personal difficulties we could anticipate.

Consideration was given to the fact that boys may get bored filling in questionnaires. Therefore before handing out questionnaires, the youth workers planned and delivered several icebreaker games that energised the group and also orientated boys towards the subject matter. Typically, the icebreakers encouraged movement, fun and an element of personal challenge. This process also developed and strengthened the relationship between the boys and the research team within each school.

Quantitative questionnaire responses were uploaded and analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) and data investigated using the appropriate statistical tools.

Focus groups

Focus groups were held each year of the study to further develop issues emerging from the quantitative data. This process began in Year One and continued throughout the study. They were taped using digital recording equipment, and then transcribed and analysed using Content Analysis to summarise the main contents of data and their messages (Cohen et al, 2011).

The focus groups were conducted within the school setting, typically in a small room or library, and consisted of between 5 and 8 boys and either one or two interviewers. An average of 15 focus groups consisting of 76 boys from the sample schools participated in the focus groups each year. Over the five years of the study 77 focus groups were held. Focus group discussions in Years 1 to 3 (aged 11-14) of the study lasted approximately 40 minutes. This increased to 50-60 minutes in Years 4 and 5 (aged 15-16). The boys who participated in the focus groups were selected randomly by teaching staff each year. As focus groups were digitally recorded facilitators were freed from taking notes. Boys were encouraged to ask questions, as well as offer their opinions on a range of subjects. After each focus group the researchers completed a proforma sheet to quickly capture what they considered were the main issues that emerged from the interview. The material was then categorised (Flick, 2009) and key themes identified. It must be pointed out that trying to keep some sort of control while enabling boys to talk can be difficult and requires effective individual and group work skills. Encouraging boys to move beyond one word answers while encouraging appropriate disclosure of thoughts and opinion can also be challenging for researchers. The relational approach underpinned by our commitment to ensuring the voice of boys was heard and valued without being judged leads us to conclude this work was effective and enabled in-depth conversations and productive dialogue particularly in the last two years of the study.

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Interviews with Year Ten Teachers

In Year three of the five year study, semi structured interviews were carried out by Trefor Lloyd with Head Teachers of Year Ten boys in six schools. Interviews ranged from one to one and a half hours and all teachers were very experienced (with at least ten years teaching - usually in their current schools). Four were male and two were female. The purpose of these interviews was to elicit from teachers their understanding of why certain boys may underachieve in schools. Year Ten Head Teachers were selected for interview as early analysis of our data was showing that boys were experiencing a psychological, attitudinal and performance dip.

Case study of All-Boys Secondary School

Also in Year three of the study a case study was also carried out by Trefor Lloyd with a range of staff in an urban all-boys secondary school. This school was chosen because it has been particularly successful in improving educational attainment amongst adolescent boys. The school catchment area included a number of wards where unemployment, poverty, educational underachievement were high. It was an area where the 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland had left their mark on the lives of families.

Youth Work Interventions

Information from the youth work intervention sessions was collected through direct feedback from participants, materials produced by the participants on flip charts, researcher observation, session recordings from the youth workers and direct verbal feedback from teachers who observed the sessions. This aspect of data collection was more than merely finding out what boys thought about our topics, it also enabled the research team to build stronger relationships with boys from year to year and provided opportunities to get the boys to reflect upon issues emanating from the questionnaires. It introduced them to us and us to them. It helped close the distance between researcher and subject.

Youth work interventions were delivered three times per year in classrooms in two of the participating schools. These typically lasted two hours. The purpose of these sessions was to elicit how the themes emanating from the quantitative questionnaires could be further explored through a youth work methodology. Methods were adapted from approaches delivered and tested by YouthAction's previous work with adolescent males. These sessions involved small group work, work in pairs, kinaesthetic approaches, artistic expression, story-telling and role playing. All sessions were designed to encourage discussion and increase participation through a methodology that encouraged safe risk taking, personal disclosure and experimentation. From Year One there was strong emphasis on energising and engaging boys through a relational approach which encouraged honesty and trust building. This led to more in-depth issue based interventions in subsequent years focusing on complex and challenging aspects of adolescent

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development such as violence, conflict and safety issues and what it means to be a man. The themes and issues that were addressed mirrored the issues emanating from analysis of the annual quantitative and qualitative data. While masculinity was addressed as a specific theme in year one, this focus underpinned sessions throughout subsequent years. Themes addressed during these sessions included subjects not typically addressed in school such as *masculinity and becoming a man; boys and emotions; conflict; violence; personal safety; anger; risk taking; education and learning; health and wellbeing; male transitions and life skills*.

Prior to sessions commencing, tables and chairs were moved around to suit the non-formal aspects of the sessions and to allow for movement while doing icebreakers and energisers. Classes were also set up to be interactive in small groups, large circles and work in pairs. Teaching staff who were available on the day also took part in the smaller working groups. In Years Three and Four (aged 14-16) one of the schools moved the sessions to three mobile classrooms, which again were adapted to suit the type of sessions that were being delivered. Therefore, regardless of the setting, consideration was given to the physical learning environment.

The youth work interventions demonstrated the value of taking time to build relationships with boys and also looking at non-traditional school subjects. Topics and issues that were directly connected to their everyday lives encouraged boys to share feelings and emotions and engage with subjects at a deeper level. Boys who reported as “*not being good at school work*” often displayed other qualities during sessions which made them feel good about themselves. On occasions when this did happen, youth workers reinforced the value of the boy’s input. Feedback also revealed that boys looked forward to the sessions. They remembered the names of the research team and asked about those who were not attending on that particular day. They clearly enjoyed the content, were highly motivated and engaged actively with subjects.

Feedback from the boys across the study about the process and purpose of the interventions was very positive. They enjoyed the interactive style and liked the fact that icebreaker games were used to orientate them to the subject matter. They believed this broke up the intensity of sessions. The approach consistently demonstrated that boys were motivated by interventions that combined energy, activity, creativity and fun to address issues. They also enjoyed learning by visualising situations rather than memorising information, which gave them a strong sense of personal achievement in contrast to learning solely through intellectual capabilities.

Boys reported learning new skills and thinking more about situations rather than just reacting. Story telling about ‘*other boys*’ was adopted to make controversial issues (e.g. alcohol misuse, violence) less personal, yet nevertheless one with which they could readily

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identify. The boys quickly connected this to their own lives and experiences and were able to add their personal story to the scenario. This gave boys a sense of control over content and increased their confidence to participate in class discussions. What was particularly striking was the way in which boys listened attentively to the stories. For example, there was total silence as the story teller outlined a scenario about young men facing a potentially violent encounter with other young men. Each time the story reached a pertinent point e.g. a violent exchange may ensue, the story teller would pause and ask the boys to break into small groups to discuss what they could do in this situation. This captured their interest and led to intense and productive discussions. Boys were encouraged to think of the types of skills they could use to try and alleviate potentially violent situations. Role play was used to rehearse those skills.

The youth work interventions provided valuable insights into the importance and benefits of addressing contextual issues that impact upon boys and young men's lives that are not typically covered in school curriculum. This is perhaps a key reason why these boys believed that adults (teachers and others) do not understand them and are perceived as 'distant'. The interventions demonstrated that by addressing issues, including controversial and sensitive subjects, school was perceived as connecting more directly to their learning and everyday lives and experiences. The interventions also helped boys prepare in practical ways for the future and enabled them to learn and rehearse new skills. Skills development was a key outcome of the interventions.

Our data was telling us that many boys believed school was boring and repetitive and, often, irrelevant to their everyday lives. This is supported by McBeath, et al (2007:46): *'the more insulated the experience from 'real life' (a curriculum is), the less likelihood there is of penetrating the inner world of disenfranchised young people.'* These sessions challenged that notion and were also designed to address other data findings in the quantitative data where boys had reported their own high levels of fidgeting, restlessness, being easily distracted and feeling nervous in new situations. In contrast, these young men were engaged, had fun, and demonstrated resilience and creativity through their actions and feedback. Boys reported annually their enjoyment of these sessions and expressed a desire to learn more about the issues raised in these sessions and, preferably, for more encounter with youth workers in the school classroom. Feedback from boys consistently revealed – *'we like the way you do things.'*

Boys appreciated being asked about what they think and enjoyed being encouraged to share their experiences and feelings. They reported feeling that they were listened to and their opinions were valued. They also appreciated learning in a way that established trust and mutual respect.

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Over the five years of the youth work interventions, masculinity underpinned all aspects of the sessions. This was important as quantitative data was consistently highlighting shifting complexities within the formation of masculine identities throughout early to mid-adolescence. The sessions were designed to enable boys to reflect upon male attitudes and behaviour and to challenge traditional stereotypical hegemonic interpretations of men and masculinity.

Importantly, boys believed that school was the best and safest place to reflect upon potentially difficult and controversial issues. They believed this would be much more difficult outside of school. They were also concerned as to who would deliver the sessions. They also reported that the development of trust with the youth workers and being shown respect by them were key reasons why they enjoyed and participated in the sessions and why they were willing to share their feelings openly. This was the view of the majority of boys, although there was a small minority who initially resisted getting involved in some of the exercises. While no boy was forced to participate, all were encouraged to get involved. Other boys believed it was useful to talk to youth workers as they would have found it difficult to discuss certain issues in front of a teacher, particularly with someone they may have had some previous conflict.

Teachers observing the work interventions made comments such as

'I can see how much these boys have to cope with outside of school'

'I can't believe how much they had to say about their beliefs and their communities.'

We are not proposing that youth work should be carried out in schools as a solution to all the issues that boys and young men may encounter through formal education. The key point we make is that it was the youth work methodology that was effective in the classroom. Our position in this paper is to refer to a youth work methodology in schools and not necessarily youth workers in schools. Basically, it does not make economic sense to place youth workers in schools (see McCready & Harland, 2013). If they are in the school then they are not in the community. In Northern Ireland Youth Work receives only 1.47% of the overall Education budget. There are enough teachers in the formal system compared to the number of youth workers. However, we firmly believe that a youth work methodology can be extremely useful within the formal education system to underpin quality pedagogy in engaging and teaching boys.

Dissemination strategy

If you have good research then it is important to have a good, effective dissemination strategy for presenting the findings and this applies particularly to qualitative studies (Keen and Todres, 2007). Our research was underpinned by a central tenet of the Centre for Young Men's studies which is to *'Taking Boys' Seriously.'*

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Our dissemination strategy comprised of:

- *'Taking Boys' Seriously'* Publication
- Local Seminars and Workshops
- Seminars and Workshops outside of Northern Ireland
- Writing Articles from the Research

The Publication *'Taking Boys' Seriously'* was freely available and disseminated by the sponsors of the research, Departments of Education and Justice NI to every school in Northern Ireland and to a list of agencies and individuals identified by the authors.

The first two Workshops and Seminars were for the research sponsors. In particular all civil servants from each Department were invited to a dissemination workshop. From here the invitations to speak to a variety of groups and organisations followed. Some we sought out e.g. The Northern Ireland Education Assembly and the Northern Ireland Youth Service. From these first presentations a series of invitations followed in particular from the formal education sector.

The key to breaking into the formal education sector came from a positive endorsement of our study by the Permanent Secretary of Education. As the most senior civil servant in Education his support for our research drew attention to Principals and senior personnel in Education across Northern Ireland.

Since the study was published in 2012 we have presented 30 workshops and eight conferences across Northern Ireland and Great Britain. This has included the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Departments of Education and Justice, Ministers' Special Advisors, the Northern Ireland Assembly Education Committee, civil servants, the Regional Training Unit (e.g. their Summer School), Teachers Unions and schools across Northern Ireland, the Schools' Principal's Annual Conference, the Northern Ireland Youth Service, as well as local groups and organisations with a working interest in boys and young men. We have also presented at Universities in Scotland and England, including the George William's YMCA College which culminated in the writing of this paper.

Teachers' Unions were a key vehicle through which our research found resonance and interest. From here we received a number of invitations to visit individual schools and school clusters. What we found was that our findings around the issue of underachievement amongst boys have received significant attention and response from formal and non-formal education sectors.

An important aspect of research dissemination is to find ways to make it informative, interesting, challenging, interactive and engaging for the listeners. As an example of this we produced (with assistance from our colleague Mark Hammond) a 9-minute DVD of

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relevant music, images of young men and research findings that we played at each of our workshops. The response was overwhelmingly positive. By then making this video available to Principals and other educationalists to share with their staff we lessened the demand on us to visit every school that invited us.

For those requesting our DVD we devised a set of advisory notes on how it should be used. This included the need for a preparation session for staff before viewing it and then a debriefing format, with questions, to follow the viewing. We have found that as a result of the DVD being shown in a number of schools we have been asked for consultation sessions with those teachers designated, and inspired, to follow through with a school strategy to address underachievement in that school.

Importantly for us we did not rest on the initial findings in the research and we continued to develop our own thinking around influencing policy and practice from our experiences of these workshops. This dissemination strategy enabled us to further develop our thinking and develop an 'Integrated (Balanced) Approach' model for working more effectively with boys and young men (see Harland & McCready, 2014) which is being implemented by the North Eastern Education and Library Board as part of its three year strategy to '*Taking Boys Seriously*.'

Central to our dissemination strategy has been approach that has resisted *telling teachers, Principals and youth workers what to do*. We do not have all the answers but we do have some thoughts and ideas that have flowed from our longitudinal research. Once we started writing the final report we decided that we were not merely going to tell people what we found. We simply asked ourselves, as researchers at the end of writing up all our data and analysis - *So What?* With this pithy question we set about sharing a series of ideas and recommendations which formed the basis of our workshops. Interestingly, for us, we found many of the ideas to address young boys' underachievement had very little resource implications and this made it a lot more attractive to the education sector.

Carrying out this five year longitudinal study has convinced us that a youth work methodology, as outlined in this paper, is an undervalued and, to date, an underestimated method of data collection for carrying out social research. In designing this study we consciously aimed to produce the types of data that would best reflect the social reality of adolescent boys' lives. However we are convinced that a youth work methodology can be effectively applied to all social research. We would also recommend that it is important to have a well thought out dissemination strategy for presenting findings and this applies particularly to qualitative studies.

Finally, we would like to acknowledge the Departments of Education and Justice in Northern Ireland for funding this longitudinal study. It has been a significant learning

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journey for us as researchers and academics and a pleasure to have listened to so many interesting and delightful boys and young men.

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Note

Within education vocabulary a tripartite categorisation of learning systems has emerged. That is formal education, informal education and non formal education. It is here the work of Combs with Prosser and Ahmed (1973) is influential in offering a definition of each.

- **“Formal education:** *the hierarchically structured, chronologically graded ‘education system’, running from primary school through the university and including, in addition to general academic studies, a variety of specialised programmes and institutions for full-time technical and professional training.*
- **Informal education:** *the truly lifelong process whereby every individual acquires attitudes, values, skills and knowledge from daily experience and the educative influences and resources in his or her environment – from family and neighbours, from work and play, from the market place, the library and the mass media.*
- **Non-formal education:** *any organised educational activity outside the established formal system – whether operating separately or as an important feature of some broader activity – that is intended to serve identifiable learning clienteles and learning objectives”.*

Within Northern Ireland, the home of the authors, the term **non-formal education** is closely associated with youth work and therefore was used in this context in this text.

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Challenging Myths about Young People and Organised Crime through Collaborative Research

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Abstract

This paper outlines how a project conducted with the Home Office to develop educational resources about young people and organised crime was able to avoid reinforcing misleading myths. Three key myths about young people and crime are explored that emerged from the consultations with young people and practitioners involved with the project. These myths are: that young people face a significant choice/dilemma moment before becoming involved with organised crime; that young people engage with organised crime out of a sense of entitlement; that there is such a thing as a typical organised crime offender among young people. In challenging these myths, the paper asserts that young people are vulnerable to exploitation rather than simply criminal, that young people's engagement with organised crime is more complex than simply stemming from greed or laziness and that it would be misleading to stigmatise young people from minority groups as typical offenders. The key argument of the paper is for the importance of collaboration with young people and practitioners when developing resources for them. This argument can also be applied more widely to indicate the importance of such collaboration when determining any policies, practices and interventions that will affect young people.

Keywords: young people; organised crime; vulnerability; collaboration; myths and assumptions

Introduction

This paper argues for the importance of collaboration in research and resource development to avoid reinforcing myths and stereotypes. It outlines how collaboration with young people and practitioners before developing resources on young people and organised crime allowed for a more authentic educational toolkit to be created.

The aim of the project was to develop educational resources about organised crime for practitioners who work with young people (a commitment made in section 5.14 of the Serious and Organised Crime Strategy, 2013). The project was commissioned by the Home

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Office and through the collaborative process we involved a range of partners in organisations that work with young people. My own role, through a grant agreement between the Home Office and YMCA George Williams College (my previous employer), was to recruit participants for and co-facilitate the consultation and evaluation stages of the project as well as supporting the development of the resource. The consultations and evaluations were facilitated by YMCA George Williams College, the Home Office and Navigator Research.

This paper will focus primarily on some of the qualitative findings from the consultation phase of the project in order to demonstrate how collaboration with young people and practitioners enabled us to identify the myths and assumptions about young people's engagement with crime that we needed to avoid reinforcing. Please note that the particular discussion and analysis presented here is my own and does not represent the official view of the Home Office or other partners involved in the project. The paper outlines three myths about young people's engagement with crime that were challenged by the young people and practitioners we engaged with and explains how the final resource was able to avoid reinforcing these myths.

The Serious and Organised Crime Toolkit is available at www.infed.org/mobi/soctoolkit. The toolkit includes a film for use with young people (Consequences), a film for practitioners explaining what serious and organised crime is and a workbook with suggested session plans and further information on young people and organised crime.

Research sample and method

The purpose of the research carried out with practitioners and young people was to support the development of the educational resources. It was conducted in three main stages:

Consultative

Two workshops were conducted with practitioners who work with young people in a range of sectors including youth work, youth offending, education, secure institutions, probation, police and social work. One workshop took place in London and the other in Liverpool. In total, 42 practitioners attended these workshops.

Three unstructured focus groups were conducted with young people in London. One group were accessed via an open access youth club session, another via their youth offending worker and the other through a targeted youth club session for young people considered to be 'at risk' of educational or social exclusion. Through these groups, 19 young people were consulted. The sample of young people therefore included both young people in the primary target group for the preventative resource and those who had already offended. This allowed us to gain realistic perspectives from young people who had offended and

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ideas on what would engage and have impact from those who had not. The sample did not include any young people who were not engaged with a youth worker or other professional. Therefore the findings can only be seen to represent young people who are already engaged with a trusted professional and, as such, may present a biased view on this particular aspect. As the toolkit was for practitioners to use with young people, it made sense (as well as them being easier to access) to consult with young people that practitioners were engaging.

Developmental

An advisory group of 7 practitioners was formed. This group met once in person to comment on initial ideas for the resource that emerged from the consultations. The rest of the contact with this group was via email. Through this, they commented on drafts of the script and the various edits of the main film, checked language and story-line with the young people they had access to, and responded to other questions that emerged during the development of the resources.

One young ex-offender also attended the advisory group meeting and was later interviewed in-depth as part of the process of developing the script for the film for use with young people. Whilst this is a limited engagement with young people at this stage (primarily due to a restricted timescale), the start of the developmental stage overlapped with the end of consultative stage. The groups of young people engaged as part of the consultations commented on developmental aspects of the project such as ideas for the script and the story-line as well as suitable language. As mentioned above, the advisory group then checked aspects of the emerging toolkit with their young people as it was developed further.

An additional group of 15 youth work and social pedagogy student practitioners were shown the first full edit of the film for comment and feedback.

Evaluative

The evaluation of the final toolkit involved the following aspects:

- Large scale survey sent to 6,000 practitioners asking them to look at the toolkit and respond (88 responses);
- Targeted survey sent to 50 practitioners asking them to use the toolkit with young people and respond (18 responses – used with 190 young people);
- 4 focus groups with 37 practitioners who work with young people in Liverpool, Manchester and London;
- 4 observed sessions of practitioners using the resource with young people in Greater Manchester and London (used with 70 young people).

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The discussion in this paper draws primarily on the qualitative themes from the consultative stage of the research and the three myths explored in the paper emerged from this consultative phase of the project. There is also some reference to the evaluation to demonstrate the success of the toolkit in challenging these myths.

Defining serious and organised crime

The Serious and Organised Crime Strategy (Home Office, 2013) is split into four key areas (the 4 Ps). These are Prevent, Protect, Pursue and Prepare. The commitment to develop educational resources for use with young people falls under the Prevent area of the Strategy and, within this, under the commitments made around Education.

Organised crime is defined by the Strategy as ‘serious crime planned, coordinated and conducted by people working together on a continuing basis. Their motivation is often, but not always, financial gain’ (Home Office, 2013: 14). Serious crime is defined as ‘crime, which may not always be “organised” but requires a national response, notably many aspects of fraud and child sexual exploitation’ (Home Office, 2013:13). There is clear overlap between serious crime and organised crime. As can be seen from these definitions, organised crime is also serious crime. Serious crime, however, is not always organised. Child sexual exploitation, for example, is serious and also often, but not necessarily, organised. Organised crime involves larger networks than something that operates at just the local level. It involves a number of layers around the organised criminal group at the centre and is usually national and often international in reach. Therefore, organised crime as defined by the strategy is distinct from ‘gangs’ as we know them at the local level (Home Office, 2013). A gang is not, in itself, an organised criminal group as per the definition. Existing gangs may, however, be utilised by organised criminal groups to, for example, distribute drugs within a local area.

It is important to note here that there has been some challenge to the policy definition of organised crime as highly organised and carefully hierarchical, with a ‘mafia’ type group at the centre. In particular, Hobbs (2013) has suggested that the networks are ‘messier’ and less clearly structured than popular definitions suggest and that the lead perpetrators may have been over-glamorised. Based on anthropological research in East London, Hobbs (2013) suggests that what we typically view as *organised* crime is usually more opportunistic than the term suggests.

From the outset of the educational resources project, it was clear that it would be a challenge to produce resources on organised crime that could represent the full range of activity that falls under the category. The practitioners involved in the consultation stage told us that ‘drug running’ was the most common way the young people they worked with came into contact with organised crime. They also felt that young people were largely unaware of the larger organised crime network that they might be associating themselves

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with by getting involved in 'drug running'. This supports Hobbs' (2013) assertion discussed above that the network is 'messier' than often suggested and, for many who become involved, more opportunistic than organised. For this reason, it was decided to focus on 'drug running' as the concrete example of how young people might engage with organised crime in the film that was created for use with them. It was also felt that a key aim of the resource would be to inform young people (and practitioners) of the levels and layers that exist beyond their own engagement with organised crime.

The rest of this paper outlines three key myths about young people and organised crime that were challenged, as a result of the research carried out with young people and practitioners. It also explores how these myths were not perpetuated by the toolkit that was subsequently developed. The three myths emerged from the consultations with practitioners as something they explicitly sought to challenge. This was reinforced more implicitly by the consultations with young people, who did not articulate the specific myths as clearly but, who sought to portray young people who engage with organised crime in ways that emphasise the complexities they face rather than drawing on simplistic interpretations.

Myth 1: The big choice/dilemma moment

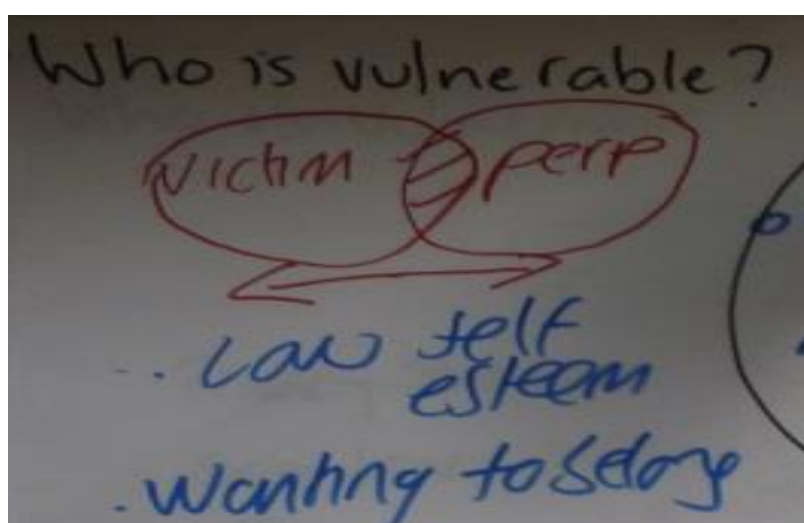
One of the most crucial findings of the consultations was that young people are viewed by practitioners as vulnerable to exploitation rather than as simply choosing criminality. Whilst the practitioners emphasised the importance of young people having the appropriate knowledge to make 'informed choices', it was also revealed that in many cases, young people may not even perceive there to be a choice, let alone feel equipped with the knowledge to make the 'right' choice. Practitioners discussed how young people may be asked to do things by people they view as friends, who they perhaps already 'owe a favour' to, and that those that get them involved are quick to entrap the young people through debt owed. For example, a police representative explained how young people involved in drug dealing may be subject to raids of their 'stash' that have actually been set up by the wider criminal group to get them into debt and ensure they remain involved. Therefore, this lack of perception of there being choice can prevent young people from being able to disengage from their involvement with organised crime. It may also be how young people become involved in the first place. For example, one thirteen year old young woman explained to us that when walking through her estate and seeing a well-known older boy who told her to 'walk with me like you're my sister', she did not feel able to refuse his request. She also did not realise immediately that she was serving as a form of protection because he was carrying drugs and there were police officers at the end of the street. This young woman did not feel there was the option to say 'no' to an older boy who was feared by her peers and with whom she had to continue to associate with as he lived on her estate. This subtle request to become involved demonstrates the lack of 'dilemma moment' for some young people. Therefore, young people need to be aware of the

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moments in which they may become involved for the first time, however subtle, in order to retain control over what happens next. This suggests that there is an overlap between *preventing* young people from engaging with organised crime and *protecting* them from exploitation by criminal groups.

Hughes (2011) compared the responses to anti-social behaviour in England and Victoria, Australia. He found that, in England, policy and practice takes a 'law and order' approach, focusing primarily on the crime. However, in Victoria, Hughes found that much more concern was placed on what were seen as the vulnerabilities of the perpetrator. Therefore preventative interventions in Victoria have more focus on meeting the needs of people who might be vulnerable to becoming perpetrators; whereas in England they focus on preventing behaviours. Hughes concludes that there is both a 'need for caution in the application of a law and order discourse, and the potential for an alternative approach that recognizes and responds to vulnerability by promoting positive behaviour and offering opportunities for development' (Hughes, 2011: 405). Whilst there should be some caution taken in applying findings about anti-social behaviour prevention to that relating to organised crime, this does appear to support the finding from our consultations with practitioners that young people at risk of engagement in crime should be seen as vulnerable rather than simply criminal:



Flipchart from consultation activity asking practitioners who is likely to engage with organised crime and why

The film developed for use with young people (Consequences) attempted to portray the complexity of young people's initiation into organised crime. For example, Sean (the main character in the film) explains how JC had bought several takeaways for him and his friends and given him an iPhone before he was asked to carry a package for the first time.

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This demonstrates how, by the time Sean was asked to be involved, he already 'owed a favour' to JC. Similarly, once he is more deeply involved, Sean becomes in debt to JC when his 'stash' is robbed and he therefore becomes trapped.

The evaluation stage of the project suggests that this sense of young people's vulnerability was effectively communicated through watching 'Consequences', as demonstrated by the following comment from a teacher who used the toolkit with a class of young people.

They said [organised crime] wasn't simple and involved a lot of planning and people. They were concerned about how it affects your future. They talked a lot about pressure and how Sean was a little person in the whole scheme. They talked about 'king pins' when discussing the suppliers of drugs and how people have 'leverage' over others (Respondent, targeted survey).

It was important to emphasise within the toolkit that it is more complex than a young person having made a 'bad choice' and needing guidance to reform their choices; it is about ensuring young people are equipped with the knowledge that they even *have a choice* and enabling them to identify the moments in which these subtle choices might be made. The toolkit supports this through encouraging discussion and reflection on whether JC is a real friend, at which points Sean might have acted differently and portraying the way in which the young person's level of engagement with organised crime as well as the consequences can spiral out of control when they become involved. The toolkit recognises that young people may be vulnerable to subtle forms of grooming and exploitation and seeks to better inform and equip them to recognise and respond accordingly. In this way, it serves not only a Prevent purpose but also overlaps with the Protect area of the Serious and Organised Crime Strategy.

Myth 2: The sense of entitlement

A prevalent societal discourse about working class young people over recent years has been that they have a false sense of entitlement. This pervasive discourse portrays young people who engage in criminal activity as operating from greed and laziness and does not take account of any wider structural inequalities they may face. A focus on young people's individual failings rather than wider inequalities has been documented across time - from the nineteenth century until today (Pitts, 2011; Stanton & Wenham, 2013). However, it is levelled only at the working classes and the notion of a 'culture of entitlement' is contrasted with the idea of a 'culture of merit', that ignores inequalities and suggests any differences in levels of success between different groups of people is due to moral rather than structural differences (Pitts, 2011). The view of young criminals is therefore that they are simply morally depraved without taking account of any inequalities or deprivation they may face (Lightowlers, 2015). It is illustrated clearly in the dominant response to the riots of summer 2011. David Cameron, in a speech immediately following the events, stated:

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Irresponsibility. Selfishness. Behaving as if your choices have no consequences. Children without fathers. Schools without discipline. Reward without effort. Crime without punishment. Rights without responsibilities. Communities without control. Some of the worst aspects of human nature tolerated, indulged – sometimes even incentivised – by a state and its agencies that in parts have become literally demoralised (Cameron, 2011 cf. Pitts, 2011: 82)

As well as this notion of a ‘culture of entitlement’ being challenged by academics (Lightowler, 2015; Pitts, 2011; Stanton & Wenham, 2013), the young people and practitioners who engaged with our consultation process painted a more complex picture about the range of factors that might be involved when young people engage with crime. Both young people and practitioners emphasised that young people who become engaged with activities such as ‘drug running’ often do so, not just to make money for themselves, but also to provide for their families. The young people and practitioners were aware of a ‘sense of easy money’ that could act as an incentive to become involved, as demonstrated by the comment from one of the evaluation surveys below:

The biggest practice challenge is how to offer young people in deprived areas with few support networks real alternatives to 'making a bit of money from running' and then supporting young people to walk away from criminal activity when they have so little to lose, especially if they already have or are likely to gain a criminal record. (Respondent, large-scale survey).

However, as demonstrated by the comment above, this ‘sense of easy money’ was alongside an awareness of the wider economic context in which employment can feel elusive as well as aspirations and hope for future prospects being particularly low for the most vulnerable young people.

The young people and practitioners in the consultations emphasised that the toolkit needed to acknowledge these more complex factors and it was overwhelmingly felt that focusing on the impacts on the young person’s family would be more effective than focusing on penal consequences. The young offenders group, particularly, told us that they were less concerned about the impact their involvement might have on their own lives than on their families, with a sense of protectiveness and responsibility felt, in most cases, for their mothers and younger siblings. The focus of the film for use with young people on the impact on family rather than on penal consequences is supported by Darke (2011) who argues that a ‘prevent as enforcement’ approach has been over-used in youth justice and is ineffective.

‘Consequences’, the film for use with young people, therefore emphasises both Sean’s concern for his family and his mother’s concern for him and his siblings. For example, the

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film starts and ends with Sean discussing how his mother worries. He discusses within the film how his mother was not always around because of health problems, meaning she was 'in and out of hospital'. This emphasised the complexities and offered a more nuanced account than the simplistic discourse of neglectful parenting that often sits alongside the entitlement discourse. This reflected the tensions discussed by the young offenders group in the consultation stage in that most of them were aware – at least to a certain extent – that their parents cared for them but also identified that they had not always received the care and support they needed. The film also refers to Sean giving money to his mother and to her losing her job, portraying how a sense of financial responsibility for his family impacted on his engagement with organised crime. As the film progresses, it shows how Sean's engagement with 'drug running' makes things worse rather than better for his family as his mother's health worsens, his siblings are put into foster care for a period of time and his brother is also drawn into 'drug running' and is eventually stabbed by JC.

The focus on the impact on the young person's family was praised across the different methods of the evaluation, from the focus groups, surveys and observations. 95% of practitioners who responded to the particular question within the large-scale survey rated 'Consequences' as either 'very effective' or 'quite effective' at communicating 'the impact of serious organised crime on the young person's family'. Young people's feedback after the observations was that the film was realistic and impactful. A practitioner who used the resource with young people and fed back via the targeted survey also stated that 'Young people found the film quite realistic and said it made them think about the impact of serious crime and mentioned especially the impact on their families' (Respondent, targeted survey).

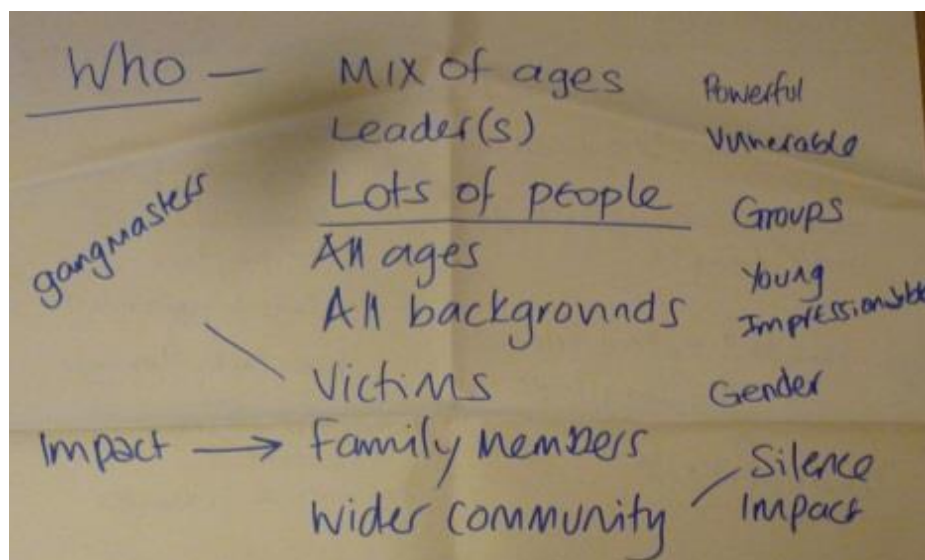
Myth 3: The typical offender

Organised crime can involve a vast range of forms of crime including: drug trafficking, people trafficking, sexual exploitation, cybercrime, fraud and other financial crimes – where these activities are organised within the networks associated with an organised criminal group. Within this, it also involves people of a vast range of ages, ethnicities and class groups (Francis et al, 2013). For example, fraud and financial crime involve a very different group of people than drug trafficking. Home Office strategies to prevent organised crime have therefore targeted a diverse range of groups from solicitors and accountants to the young people and practitioners involved with this particular project.

Within the consultation workshops, we asked practitioners to help us identify realistic characters that we could use within the film-based resource. This was an incredibly difficult task due to the level of diversity within organised crime networks which are large, far-reaching and encompass a range of people of different backgrounds. We asked them to focus on that within the realms of their professional experience:

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Flipchart from consultation activity asking practitioners what groups of people are involved with organised crime

The image above demonstrates the level of discomfort felt by practitioners about labelling a particular group. The practitioners told us they were reluctant to reinforce labels about young people and particularly young offenders. They were keen that the resources developed should avoid reinforcing stigma, particularly of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups.

Recent quantitative research commissioned by the Home Office on organised crime in the UK goes some way towards identifying who is most likely to get involved in organised crime. The Home Office study, conducted in 2013, looked at 'criminal careers in organised crime'. Interestingly, organised crime offenders were found to be older than general offenders, with the average age at which the 'inclusion offence' was committed for the specific category of organised crime being 32 years old (Francis et al, 2013). Only 1% of organised crime offenders were under 18 years of age, compared with 19% for general crime (Francis et al, 2013). However, it should be noted here that the methodology for the study applied strict rules in terms of which offences needed to be committed for the person to be considered an organised crime offender. Therefore, lower level activities such as 'drug running', as identified in our consultations as the main method of engagement by young people with organised crime, would not have qualified them for this category. This suggests that young people are unlikely to be 'career criminals' (or the senior perpetrators) within organised criminal networks. However, as previously discussed, they may be vulnerable to exploitation by such groups - and even viewed as a temporary or 'disposable' commodity.

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In terms of ethnicity, 56% of organised crime offenders in the study discussed above were found to be White European. This is lower than for general crime offenders where 81% are White European (Francis et al, 2013). 15% of organised crime offenders were Asian compared with 5% for general crime. 23% were Black compared with 8% for general crime (Francis et al, 2013). This demonstrates that there is more diversity among organised crime than general crime offenders but that White Europeans are still the majority. In regards to gender, 95% of organised crime offenders were male compared with 78% for general crime (Francis et al, 2013).

Therefore, any assumption that the typical offender is young and/or from a BAME background is flawed, both in relation to organised crime and, even more so, crime more generally. The most obvious way to avoid stigma and stereotyping within the toolkit being developed as part of this project was to ensure that the resources portrayed the diverse levels and layers of organised crime. This was challenging as the consultation activities found that case studies, specific examples and personal narratives are more likely to engage young people than generalised descriptions or statistics.

Whilst the film for use with young people is careful not to stigmatise minority groups (by choosing, for example, to portray the main character as White British), it does focus on one fictional character throughout. Sean is the only character seen on camera but his narrative refers to others involved in the activities he engages with. Within this, the attempt was made to ensure that the wider networks and layers within organised crime are alluded to. Sean refers not just to JC, the person with whom he has direct contact, but on more than one occasion he mentions the people that JC has to report to. Other moments within the film also allude to the wider networks. For example, when Sean's 'stash' of drugs is robbed while he is not at home, he states 'It's like they knew I had just had a drop off'. The discussion prompts within the toolkit encourage practitioners to facilitate discussion about what this means and whether Sean is being deliberately put into debt by the wider criminal group. Later on in the film, Sean relates his involvement with organised crime to a wildlife programme he has seen on television. He describes himself as the 'deer' who is hunted and people like JC as the 'hyenas' who hunt them. However, this portrayal of the wider networks remained the most challenging aspect of organised crime to implement in the resources. One practitioner who commented on an edit of the film asked 'What about the lions above the hyenas?' again illustrating the difficulty in showing the levels and layers when the young person is unlikely to have direct contact with more than one level up in the hierarchy.

This was less challenging to portray in the introductory film for practitioners (What is serious and organised crime?). Given the target audience, it could offer more generalised information on the forms of organised crime, how young people might become engaged and how this fits into the wider context. For example, whilst the youth worker and youth

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offending worker within the film discuss how young people might become involved, the police representative explains the forms of crime, the typical hierarchy and the local, national and international context of organised crime.

Within the evaluation stage of the project, practitioners praised the toolkit for not focusing on a BAME young person within the film. They recognised the difficulties in portraying the different levels of organised crime and suggested additional films focusing on other characters in the narrative could combat this.

Conclusion

This paper has outlined three myths about young people and organised crime that practitioners and young people involved in the research for the educational resources project were keen to challenge. These myths emerged during the consultation stage of the project, particularly in the challenging of them by practitioners, and are as follows:

1. That there is a clear choice or dilemma experienced by young people before they engage with organised crime;
2. That young people who engage with crime do so out of a sense of entitlement;
3. That there is such thing as a typical offender when it comes to crime and, particularly, organised crime.

The evaluation of the toolkit that was developed suggests it was largely successful in avoiding reinforcing these myths. 81% of practitioners who responded to the large-scale survey stating that they would definitely use the film 'Consequences' with young people. This is significant given that during the consultation stage, practitioners were overwhelmingly wary of myths and assumptions being reproduced by the toolkit. Additionally, 95% of respondents rated the toolkit as 'very useful' or 'quite useful' overall and 95% also said they would recommend the toolkit to a colleague. Readers of this paper may want to decide for themselves by accessing the Serious and Organised Crime Toolkit at www.infed.org/mobi/soctoolkit.

The film 'What is serious and organised crime?' is aimed at practitioners and offers an introduction to serious and organised crime, and how young people may become involved. The film 'Consequences' is designed to be used with young people as an interactive resource. It is recommended that it is watched in three parts with group discussion in between. The workbook contains session plans and discussion prompts for use with 'Consequences' as well as further information on serious and organised crime.

This paper has suggested that myths are avoided, even challenged, by the toolkit. In particular, it challenges the 'culture of entitlement' and 'prevention as enforcement' discourses which are also criticised in the academic literature. Portraying the range of

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people involved in organised crime was a more significant challenge, particularly in 'Consequences' which needed to be personalised rather than abstract in order to be engaging and relevant to young people. The portrayal of the range of people and activities included in organised crime would be enhanced by adding to the toolkit other films that cover different characters, forms of organised crime and ways in which young people are vulnerable to involvement.

The level of collaboration with young people and practitioners through the research for the project enabled these myths and assumptions, among others, to be unearthed and avoided in the toolkit. As such, the key argument of this paper is for the importance of collaborating with young people and practitioners in the development of resources for them. This is supported by Case (2006) who argues that the qualitative accounts of young people should be sought in defining the risk factors for their engagement with crime. Such collaborative processes should also be used to inform policies and practices more widely to ensure that outputs and interventions are relevant, authentic and not misleading.

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Apprenticeships. New Opportunities for Young People, or Another Great Training Robbery?

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Abstract

Apprenticeships have been ‘reinvented’ supposedly as a way of enabling young people to enter skilled and reliable employment, but also as an alternative to attending university. Building on the findings of our initial research, this paper argues that despite the creation of over 2 million apprenticeships since 2010, there is little evidence of either of these. On the contrary, it argues that apprenticeships have constituted a ‘Great Training Robbery’ and that without a radical change in the way the economy is organised, attempts to improve their ‘quality’ are unlikely to be sufficient. As traditional ‘transitions’ from school to employment continue to break down, the expansion of the apprenticeship programme provides new challenges for practitioners.

Keywords: Young people, employment, skills, apprenticeships, economy.

Introduction

The reinvention of apprenticeships in the UK has received unanimous backing across the political spectrum. The term ‘reinvention’ is an appropriate description because the new schemes are very different to the traditional ‘time-serving’ apprenticeship that proved an important avenue in the transition from school to work for young people – particularly young males – and which were in serious decline by the end of the 1960s. These were replaced by ‘youth training’ – described by its critics as *Training Without Jobs* (Finn, 1987). Although youth training was a kneejerk response to increased cyclical unemployment and economic downturn in the 1970s, young people have faced growing ‘structural’ unemployment – the collapse of apprenticeships coinciding with the rapid decline in manufacturing which had previously generated ‘youth jobs’. As a result of declining employment opportunities, young people have increasingly stayed in full-time education for longer, many on ‘vocational’ courses in sixth-forms or in Further Education, but also progressing to Higher Education – what has been described as a process of ‘education without jobs’ (Ainley & Allen, 2010).

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Initially renamed as Modern Apprenticeships by John Major, it was during the period of the Coalition government that apprenticeships became a major part of education and training policy, with well over 2 million being created. As well as being promoted as an alternative to university, apprenticeships were also introduced in response to perceived labour market needs – though as will be clear later, the evidence of this is far from convincing. According to researchers at the Centre for Economic Performance, London School of Economics and Political Science for example:

Britain has serious skill shortages and enduring skills gaps at the skilled crafts, technician and associate professional level. These shortages have consequences for the economy as whole, contributing to wage inflation and making macro-economic policy management more difficult by pushing up wages and lowering productivity growth in the longer term (Steedman, Gospel & Ryan, 1998).

As a result of the changing nature of the economy and the decline of manufacturing, the vast majority of new schemes have been in the service sector – business, healthcare and retailing recording the most starts and there have been as many starts by women as by men.

This contribution builds on our initial research on apprenticeships (Allen & Ainley, 2014). That research involved an analysis of official statistical data on apprenticeship participation and a review of report evidence on the success of apprenticeships from other interested parties. It was motivated by our more general interest in the relationship between young people, education, skills and employment – on which we have published widely (see in particular Allen & Ainley 2007, 2013; Ainley & Allen, 2010). We include here the most recent Skills Funding Agency data on apprenticeship starts and in the context of the 2015 General Election result, provide a more accurate assessment of their future direction than is widely available.

There has continued to be a shortage of apprenticeships

It is sometimes argued that apprenticeships have an image problem in that they are seen as being inferior to attending university (Ofsted has criticised schools for not promoting them), or that parents are prejudiced and have not been properly informed about their importance (Blackwell, 2015). There may be some truth in this, but the main problem is that there continues to be a shortage of opportunities. As our research noted, between August and October 2013 for example, over 460,000 online applications were made through the National Apprenticeship Service, representing a 46% increase; but vacancies only increased by 24%, resulting in 12 applicants per post.

As our research also noted, manufacturing and engineering apprenticeships are particularly in short supply. ‘Elite’ apprenticeships, those with British Gas and Rolls-Royce

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for example, are in such high demand that suitable applicants have only about a 1 in 15 chance of being accepted. In comparison, qualified applicants for engineering at Oxford have a 1 in 3 chance of success. In response to the overall shortage of apprenticeships, the then Skills Minister, Matthew Hancock, told *The Guardian* (05/02/14): ‘With each online position attracting an average of 12 applications, demand continues to outstrip supply and I would urge more employers to consider how they can take advantage of this available pool of talent and grow their business’.

There has been an additional problem in that many of the new apprenticeships were set up for existing adult employees who were ‘converted’ into apprentices (Fuller & Unwin, 2012). This allowed the National Apprenticeship Service (NAS), charged with the development of the new apprenticeships, to meet its targets; but with the ‘Train to Gain’ initiative being wound down, it also enabled training providers to continue to access state funding. An investigation for BBC’s *Panorama* (02/04/12) for example, found that nearly 4 in 10 of supermarket chain Morrison’s entire workforce were classed as ‘trainees’ so that 1 in 10 of all apprenticeships created in England during the previous year had been the result of a regrading exercise by this single supermarket chain. Of nearly 18,000 new Morrison’s apprenticeships starting in the academic year 2010/11, only 2,200 were for those below 19, while in the same period Morrison had started just 290 apprenticeships aged 16-18. *The Telegraph* (28/10/11) also reported that an Asda scheme, accounting for 25,000 posts, was only for staff already employed at the supermarket.

Increasingly susceptible to charges that apprenticeships were not delivering what they were supposed to, the Coalition commissioned television’s *Dragons’ Den* entrepreneur Doug Richard to conduct a review. Partly as a result of his recommendations, (Richard, 2012) new data shows over a quarter of apprenticeships being started by under-19 year olds. In 2011/12 and 2012/13, by way of comparison, when Coalition policy begun to kick in; almost half of apprenticeships were started by over 25 year olds and another third by those between 19 and 24:

Apprenticeship starts August 2014–April 2015

Under 19	101,700
19-24	122,100
Over 25	150,300

Source: Statistical First Release SFA/SFR29, published 25th June 2015

At the same time however, the increases in total number of starts may be levelling off. There were 440,400 Apprenticeship starts in the 2013/14 academic year, a decrease of 13.7 per cent on 2012/13. The provisional SFA figures show there are currently 776,800 participating in funded apprentices, this compares with 851,000 during the previous 12

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months and 868,700 for 2012/13. Much of the levelling can be explained by the fall in adult apprentices.

Most apprenticeships have been low level and ‘dead end’

As the data below shows, a further problem with the new apprenticeships is that two-thirds continue to be at Intermediate (GCSE) level, lasting a year sometimes shorter. The fact that 70% of 16 year-olds already gain 5 A*-C pass grades at GCSE means that most current apprenticeships do not provide opportunities for any skills development, only replication. Neither are there clear routes of progression for young people through the different apprenticeship levels. Greenwich University research (DBIS, 2013a) shows 53% of Advanced level apprenticeships had progressed via Intermediate level, but only 61% of those were under-19:

Apprenticeships starting August 2014-April 2015 at different levels

Intermediate	224,000
Advanced	122,100
Higher	12, 300

Source: Statistical First Release SFA/SFR29, published 25th June 2015

Apprentices and students

The number of Advanced level starts is particularly low compared to the 850,000 entries for GCE A-levels in the summer of 2014. For the previous full-year, there were only 35,600 Advanced level starts by under-19s – less than a third of the 145,000 total starts. At higher level there were just under 3,000 starts by those under 24 – one third of total starts – but only 700 by those under 19. By way of comparison, 40% of all young people now start some form of higher education. In other words, despite Coalition attempts to promote them as such, apprenticeships are not a serious alternative to university for young people in terms of future occupational progression and earnings.

Even taking into account the cost of student loans and despite the number of graduates pushed down into ‘non-graduate’ jobs (Allen & Ainley, 2013), degrees still pay a ‘graduate premium’. A Lancaster University study commissioned by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (DBIS, 2013b) shows average graduate earnings exceed those of non-graduates in all subject areas. Men will have earned an additional 28% more (£168k over a working lifetime) on average compared with someone with a similar background who did not go to university. For women, the gap between what female graduates and non-graduates earn is markedly larger, equating to an additional 52% (£252k over a working lifetime).

Claims that young people are deserting university for apprenticeships are therefore groundless, as are assertions by Labour MP Frank Field that ONS data show apprentices

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earning an average of £11.10 per hour on completion, a figure higher than a quarter of graduates (*The Telegraph* 17/01/14). The DBIS's own survey put average apprentice wages at just over £6 per hour with just seven in ten apprentices (71%) receiving the minimum amount they should get based on their year and/or age (DBIS, 2013c).

Further Greenwich University research (DBIS, 2014) also shows low rates of progression from Advanced Level Apprenticeships to Higher Education. While 20% of Advanced Level Apprentices had moved on to Higher Education within seven years of beginning their apprenticeship, the number moving into HE within three years of starting (in other words, more or less immediately after completing) was less than 10%. For Advanced Level Apprentices under 19 (in other words, those deciding to leave full-time education for workplace-based learning) the proportion going on to HE within three years of starting their apprenticeship (in other words, almost immediately after it ends) has remained at around 12%.

A Great Training Robbery?

Although all apprenticeships are supposed to provide technical knowledge and some general education, narrow competence-based National Vocational Qualifications have formed the basis of apprenticeship training. NVQs were subject to serious criticism when introduced as the main industrial training standard in the late 1980s; but have continued to be a benchmark qualification. According to their proponents (see in particular, Jessop, 1991), NVQs reflected the growth of a new and superior educational paradigm, which sought to demystify assessment and move away from a system that has been 'provider-led' to one that is 'learner-centred'. Rather than trainees/apprentices being assessed in college classrooms by lecturers, 'verifiers' visit workplaces to observe the carrying out of tasks, or collect witness statements by employers to supplement observations. For critics, NVQs are based on a 'behaviourist' model (Hyland, 1994) with learners reduced to passive performers of prescribed tasks rather than being active agents. For critics, the NVQ preoccupation with 'learning outcomes' deliberately ignores how learning takes place. For Brockmann, Clarke and Winch (2008) for example, NVQ marginalises theoretical knowledge. Though to a limited extent this was corrected in the full-time General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ), this increasingly took on features of 'academic' learning with textbooks and multi-choice objective tests (Allen, 2004). For Smithers (1997), NVQs have destroyed the established and respected technical education of the post-war years.

General Election 2015: Mr Cameron's three million apprenticeships

The Richard Review called for apprenticeships to be for new workers in new roles and that as the 'real consumers' of training, employers should have more control over what sort of training apprentices should have and how government funding was used. In October 2013 the Government published its reform programme, *The Future of Apprenticeships in England: Implementation Plan*. This announced that apprenticeship specifications would be

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redesigned by leading employers in each sector and that new forms of funding delegation would be financed which would put ‘employers in the driving seat’.

Both Labour and the Conservatives backed Richard’s proposals and pledged more and better apprenticeships in the next Parliament. In the run up to the election, ‘apprenticeship’ became a buzz-word as the Conservatives promised another 3 million and to ‘roll out Degree Apprenticeships’ – by this we assume they meant more Higher Level schemes. David Cameron, taking advantage of pre-election media attention, launched a new Whitbread’s scheme, announcing he wanted apprenticeships to be level-pegging with a university degree, giving millions more people the dignity of work and a regular pay packet (*BBC Election 2015*, 09/04/15). But the new apprenticeships were at the subsidiary Costa Coffee, where an intermediate programme, as well as teaching how to make hot drinks, will also include customer service, communication and team-building skills (!). With the election days away, Cameron also promised that £227 million raised from Deutsche Bank Libor fines would be used to create 40,000 apprenticeships for 22-24 year olds who had been out of work for six months (*Guardian* 28/01/15) – failure to accept an apprenticeship would result in loss of benefits.

In response to concerns from government skills advisor Alison Wolf, that there would not be enough money to fund the high quality schemes the economy needed (Wolf, 2015), Chancellor Osborne announced an apprenticeship levy on large firms (July 2015 Budget). At the time of writing there are no further details, although Wolf suggested a 0.5% contribution on employer payrolls would raise £2 billion. Osborne also announced that rather than employers being given money directly, a new ‘digital voucher’ exchangeable for government funding can be passed to a chosen provider. This would certainly reduce paper work, but as our research warned, a potential problem with the Richard proposals will be that smaller employers in particular, would have neither the time nor the experience to run an apprenticeship scheme as they have relied on the training agencies to recruit, organise and provide apprentice training.

In the construction industry, for example – which the government considers a crucial area of growth and development, the Industry Training Board’s Steve Radley told a Parliamentary Sub-Committee for Education and Training (10/12/14) that seven out of ten providers in the sector (one in which the government had been anxious to increase apprenticeships) had less than 49 employees and questioned their ability to be able to negotiate with individual providers. Unsurprisingly, because they have been one of the main financial benefactors, training agencies have been some of the most critical of the new proposals, claiming they could result in an 80% drop in numbers, with HIT Training’s John Hyde telling *The Guardian* (07/01/14), the proposed changes were ‘well-intentioned but ultimately misguided. It risks derailing vocational skills training for our young people’.

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Why can't we do it like the Germans?

Though Richard considered it inappropriate for the UK, the German apprenticeship system has provided an inspiration to others, with Labour's influential Lord Adonis arguing it was the reason for both German economic success and low levels of youth unemployment (*Guardian* 07/01/13). Rather than using the free-market 'employer-led' approach proposed by Richard however, the German model is dependent on state direction. German apprentices sign a contract lasting for around three years with a company licenced as a provider rather than merely an employer. 90% of apprenticeship starts in Germany are at level 3 or above with training needs discussed by employer and trade union committees which also oversee apprenticeship content. 25% of employers provide apprenticeships and all employers with more than 500 employees are bound to do so, compared with 305 who volunteer to do so in the UK (Steedman, 2010). Apprentices participate in a 'dual system', spending part of the week in work-based training and part of their week (up to two days) completing the *Berufsschule* – classroom-based study of the more theoretical aspects of their vocation. Alternatively, apprentices undertake 'blocks' of classroom learning.

According to the Institute of Public Policy Research (2013), while a smaller proportion of young people in Germany attend university – less than a third, a much greater proportion – up to 60% – complete apprenticeships of several years and 90% of them then secure employment. All German apprentices have proper employee status from the day they begin working even though, as in other European countries, apprentices are paid less than in the UK. This reflects more of a 'trainee' or even 'student' status as part of a recognised transition process from youth to adulthood through the development of an occupational identity. In Germany, 40 out of every 1,000 employees are apprentices compared to just 11 in the UK (Steedman, 2010). Brockmann, Clarke and Winch (2008) contrast the 'holistic' approach of German apprenticeship learning, designed to allow the student to take 'autonomous and responsible' action in the workplace, with the UK model which focusses on particular skills at the expense of any personal or social development and on confirming existing skills rather than encouraging the development of new ones.

The German apprenticeship system is a product of post-war 'social partnership', a relationship which depends on a strong regulatory framework. Under social partnership, employers and trade unions have both committed to the establishment of a national framework involving both legislation and much higher levels of state involvement and financing than the British 'market state' could possibly allow. Markets are closely regulated with national coordination of research and development. Apprenticeships reach well beyond the manufacturing sector – although 40% of German apprentice schemes are in industrial production and manufacturing employed 24% of workers at the end of the 20th century, compared with 18% in the UK (Steedman, 2010). Providing a 'licence to practice', entrants have only been legally allowed to enter many occupations by completing an apprenticeship. As a result, for Steadman (2010: 23):

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Apprenticeship in Germany is still the route into work and further career development for nearly 2/3rds of all young people' and the survival of the German dual system has demonstrated both its durability and also its ability to respond to changes in the economy and the occupational structure.

While the German system is far from perfect, it remains light years away from that of the UK.

A jobs, not a training problem

Despite being exposed to global pressures and adopting an increasing Neo-Liberal orientation, the German economy has fared better in its ability to maintain its manufacturing base and its state-driven apprenticeship system has clearly been integral to this; the issue is whether it can continue to do this in the future. This can be contrasted to the UK economy without any real industrial or employment policy that relies on a labour market predominately determined by 'free market' principles, has been more fully exposed to longer term structural change and where the decline of 'intermediate' and technical jobs has been more pronounced.

Examination of labour market trends in the post-crash period now show that a large proportion of new jobs being created are low-skilled, low-paid positions at the lower end of the service sector. The increase in output has been the result of an increase in those in employment, not because of an increase in productivity or technological investment. There has also been a growing 'self-employed' and 'zero-hour' *lumpen* workforce, while trade unions have remained weak and have found it increasingly difficult to recruit among an atomised and disparate workforce.

Without a radical change in the way the economy is organised, simply improving the 'quality', the design, or the image of apprenticeships in the way suggested earlier, is unlikely to be sufficient. With a UKCES (2014) employer survey estimating 4.3 million workers currently have qualifications and skills more advanced than their jobs require and the influential CIPD (2014) calculating that 1 in 5 jobs needs only a primary education, a major misconception of free market or 'neo-classical' economics is that increasing the supply of 'skills' will inevitably lead to increased employer demand for them.

From a research perspective, the discussion about the future of apprenticeships has to be a debate about economics as much as it does about education and training and this requires a much more interdisciplinary approach than has been the case so far. For practitioners however, helping young people navigate an increasingly precarious transition to adulthood, the reinvention of apprenticeships creates a particular dilemma. While the apprenticeship system as a whole may be failing to provide the necessary security needed,

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for many individual young people, even a low level and temporary apprenticeship may be the only thing on offer or preferable to an unpaid work experience placement – or even spending another year on a college course that is unable to provide clear outcomes.

Most basically, what is widely understood as *The Youth Question* – how society integrates successive generations into its ongoing structures and strictures – is, as Phil Cohen wrote in the original preface to his 1997 *Rethinking...*, ‘affected by the profound changes which our society is at present undergoing [which] are radically redefining the terms of the youth question in a way which has outstripped our existing grammars of explanation’. As a result, traditional paradigms of ‘transition’ have collapsed, putting in question the traditionally conceived mentoring role of youth work. Youth work, as Tony Jeffs says in his introductory scene setting to Naomi Stanton’s 2015 *Innovation in Youth Work*, is therefore ‘obliged to remake itself’ once again (p.11).

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Rethinking Personal and Professional Boundaries between Young People and Youth Work Practitioners as Manifested through Connections on Online Social Network Sites.

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Abstract

Social network sites as spaces that young people actively engage in has created new possibilities for youth workers to consider as practice areas, including the relationships between workers and young people and the impact this has on boundaries. This study focussed on the unsanctioned connections between youth workers and young people on social network sites. Due to the delay in policy responses and its dissemination, along with the speed at which technology has developed varied practice ensued. The way in which practitioners and young people connected with each other depended on the nature of those relationships and how they were perceived by both parties. Where practitioners considered themselves to have developed relationships on a professional basis, findings showed that they were unlikely to reveal information about themselves of a personal nature, including online social network profiles. The maintenance of personal and professional boundaries in these cases was key. Where practitioners viewed their role as 'more than' a job, these boundaries were unclear. Practitioners who perceived their role to be 'more than' a job shared certain characteristics. They tended to live and practice in the same geographical area and therefore had a certain amount of shared history. This created multiple relationships and vested interest in these particular areas. For the young people, they viewed information sharing as personal because their relationships with some practitioners involved them talking about all aspects of their lives. Therefore, their relationships with practitioners could be grouped into those whom they perceived to be 'like a friend' and those whom they did not class as friends. Where they perceived a practitioner to be 'like a friend', they were more willing to share personal and socially intimate information.

Keywords: online, boundaries, unsanctioned, space, youth work, social network sites

Introduction

Youth work as a profession aims to meet young people where they are at – not only socially and emotionally, but also physically (Davies, 2010; Ingram & Harris, 2005). It was

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therefore inevitable that social network sites would receive attention from youth work practitioners:

When Facebook first came on the scene it was very much everybody, everybody that works with youth, with young people felt oh my God this will be a fantastic way to keep in touch with young people, which I totally agree with (Connexions background practitioner 2, cited in Conradie, 2015).

The National Youth Agency (NYA) commissioned a study to consider the responses and capacity of youth work to engage with social network sites. A finding of this research was how often the interaction between young people and practitioners on social network sites took place without being agreed by line managers and/or outside the organisation's policy guidance (Davies & Cranston, 2008). This contact was therefore considered to be unsanctioned or 'under the radar'. This article seeks to explore the nature of these unsanctioned connections; with a focus on the impact of how boundaries are perceived and the policy and practice implications. A main principle and value of youth work is to maintain personal and professional boundaries (NYA, 1999). This study provided new insight into how personal and professional boundaries are perceived by both youth work practitioners and young people and reframes these to fit young people's experience with wider implications that go beyond social network spaces.

Methodology

Due to the unsanctioned and hidden nature of online connections between youth workers and young people, very little is known about why and how these happen. For this reason, a social constructivist grounded theory was considered the most appropriate research approach (Charmaz, 2006). This approach allowed for the data to speak for itself, limiting the influence of the researcher's preconceived ideas. As a youth work practitioner with the majority of my experience located in the statutory sector, I held very strong preconceived ideas at the outset of the research process. These were based on my own youth work training and experiences as a youth work manager. I often heard or repeated the adage, 'you can be friendly, but never their friend'. I therefore wanted to figure out why some practitioners were not following this and understand more about their motivations. Due to the perceived 'under the radar' or unsanctioned nature of the connections, I was unsure how many participants I would find who had direct experience of social network site connections who would be willing to speak to me. Therefore, I decided to interview participants involved in youth work generally to gather their thoughts and opinions on the matter.

I interviewed 21 youth work practitioners and 14 young people. Criteria for participation were broad and attempted to be as inclusive as possible for those involved with universal youth service provision. Practitioners had to work with young people within the youth

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service. Young people had to be over the age of 16 and access universal youth service provision. Due to changed government priorities that led to severe service provision cuts and also a restructure at the time of fieldwork (2011-12), I found it very difficult to access young people. The interviews were semi-structured to allow for participants to share the meanings they attached to the practice without being constrained or limited by the interview questions and process.

Findings

The main theme to emerge from this study was the nature of relationships between youth workers and young people and how these are developed. Based on the perceived relationship, youth workers or young people may or may not choose to initiate an online connection through a social network site. This section is divided into two parts: Firstly, how practitioners experienced their relationships with young people and how they perceived their personal and professional boundaries on social network sites. Secondly, how young people perceived relationships with practitioners and how this impacted on their social network site connection decisions. This part also identifies the notion of young peoples' boundaries and how these are maintained within youth work relationships.

Out of the 21 practitioners interviewed, five were connected to young people on social network sites. Out of the 14 young people interviewed, one was connected through personal profile to a practitioner. Five of the young people interviewed were working in youth clubs as volunteers with younger young people. All five of them had previously known young people they worked with on their personal profiles. Two also added young people that were not previously known to them to their personal profiles. However, the findings do not only relate to what was happening at the time of the fieldwork but also to participants' perceptions and how they would have liked to connect and interact with each other.

Practitioners and their perceived relationships with young people

Practitioners perceived their role with young people either as professional or as 'more than' a job. This had an impact on the type of relationships that they developed with young people.

Practitioners who perceived their role as a professional relationship only

The majority of practitioners were very aware of their personal and professional boundaries and the need to maintain these. Practitioners felt that in order to maintain their boundaries they had to treat all young people that they worked with the same. Therefore, practitioners aimed to foster the same type of relationships with all the young people that they worked with:

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Oh blimey! All the basic stuff about crossing the boundaries and obviously not keeping professional relationships, becoming friendly. It can blur..., it can be detrimental in all sorts of ways, wouldn't it? I would say if they are involved in my life... they don't want to know what I'm doing in my personal life either. And I don't want them to know all my personal information. And I'd fear that our relationship would change, wouldn't it? (Connexions background practitioner 3, cited in Conradie, 2015).

Some practitioners could see the benefit of work profiles in order to share information with young people but also to gather information about young people. Work profiles provided practitioners with the opportunity to maintain a boundary between their personal lives and their professional lives. However, it still provided them with the opportunity to access information about young people that they would not have had any other access to.

A concern with work profiles for practitioners included the time implication and the expectations that young people held with regards to responding to private messages. Social network sites allows for asynchronous but also synchronous communication (Ellison & Boyd, 2013). Asynchronous communication is like receiving and responding to an e-mail or a comment on a status update – where the response is delayed. Synchronous communication is similar to a face to face conversation and takes place in real time. Due to the 24/7 nature of how young people use social network sites this added additional time commitment and workload, as the expectation was that practitioners would respond as soon as possible.

Practitioners acknowledged a perceived benefit to group pages in order to share information and photographs with young people. Group pages allowed for information sharing, but this was not perceived as a useful tool for information gathering. Practitioners were concerned about managing a group page and were reluctant to administrate these due to their uncertainty of the guidance and also the perceived time implications:

If we had Facebook and we could just send out one message to all of them - because I know they look at it every day. That would've made my life a lot easier. So if we had a group like Facebook, like you would have a youth project Facebook, and then we could put the photos up afterwards and we could've shared, you know, what happened and that would've been nice. And easier and saved me a lot of time (Connexions background practitioner 3, cited in Conradie, 2015).

Practitioners considered that they were maintaining their personal and professional boundaries by accessing information through online connections that their volunteers or other practitioners had with young people. If they friended these practitioners, they were able to view some aspects of the young people's posts if young people tagged the mutual

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friend in it; or when they responded to a comment or photo of the mutual friend. This provided them with access to information that they were unable or unwilling to access directly themselves:

She's almost like our inside informer, if you know what I mean. She knows young people and she'll bring young people in the club that wouldn't normally come to club because they all sit on Facebook and she knows their home situations (Youth work background practitioner 4, cited in Conradie, 2015).

Practitioners also perceived that they maintained their personal and professional boundaries through the process of client searching. Some practitioners searched for young people's profiles and if the young people did not have secure privacy settings they would be able to access information without friending them. The practitioners that engaged in this practice did not feel that they were overstepping any boundaries as they perceived the information to be available in the public domain.

...to try to get to the bottom of their peer issues or fights at school. And some of the kids haven't shut their profiles. So you can go and snoop, check up on kids on Facebook, because a lot of them haven't got good security settings (Youth work background manager 1, cited in Conradie, 2015).

Practitioners who perceived their role as 'more than' a job

Those that perceived their role as 'more than' a job were more likely to add young people to their personal profiles. The study found that practitioners who friended young people to their personal profiles shared certain characteristics. They tended to do youth work and live in the same geographical spaces in which they had history. They connected with young people in the village that they lived and worked; but not from the neighbouring village in which they also volunteered in a youth club. Some practitioners moved to a new village and worked in a youth club in this new village; but because they did not have a shared history in the geographical space, they did not connect online with the young people. They viewed connecting with these young people as overstepping of their professional boundaries. Therefore, the history within a space was a determining factor in the maintaining or blurring of personal and professional boundaries and how these were perceived:

Uhm, but I think it's all about those ground rules again, it comes down to boundaries. So yeah, I don't mind, I think you, you hear about different things, but I didn't grow up in this area, so I haven't got that history... (Connexions background practitioner 1, cited in Conradie, 2015).

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History within shared spaces created multiple roles and responsibilities for practitioners. A practitioner might be a parent of a young person or a family friend, for example. This meant the practitioner might be involved with a young person and their family in more than one capacity. Multiple relationships blur the boundaries between personal and professional domains due to pre-existing personal or even professional relationships. This, therefore, created different types of relationships with young people in different geographical spaces; even though practitioners verbally adhered to the ideal of treating all young people they work with the same. This variation in relationship manifested online through connecting on social media where multiple relationships existed; compared with not connecting in areas where practitioners had no shared history. This created differentiation in practice, as some practitioners had shared history and others did not. This led to uncertainty about what practitioners could expect from their co-workers:

Yeah, it's very difficult. And, and can you? The debate I've had with myself is, can I tell them who they can talk to? (Youth work background manager 2, cited in Conradie, 2015).

Practitioners were interested in connecting with young people to gain further insight and information about them. Overwhelmingly, this was not with any malicious intent, rather because they wanted to help and support young people. By having access to additional information, they were able to include informed responses and activities within their weekly youth work sessions. They felt that it enabled them to be more effective as they would know what the young people were getting up to throughout the week; and could therefore respond accordingly when they met with young people in sessions:

No info and that's where, that's why Facebook was so important. That's where you became aware of the inside life. When I was a volunteer, you know, when we got into the club we'd know if two people weren't talking or people were fighting or someone was going out with somebody else. We knew where to watch or if a new relationship has started up, you knew what sort of conversations to have to make sure they were ok, make sure you understood what was going on. Whereas now, you going in with conversations but you are not sure, you don't have that inside knowledge you know. And it also helped me plan what kind of sessions I was kind of doing (Youth work background practitioner 4, cited in Conradie, 2015).

Young People's perceived relationships with practitioners

Young people developed different types of relationships with different practitioners. They admitted to not liking some practitioners, others they saw as 'someone working at the youth club' and others were perceived as 'like a friend'. Young people shared certain information with the majority of practitioners within a youth club setting. For young people, all information was personal as they were interacting with practitioners in their

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own personal capacity. Therefore, for young people these relationships were personal as it involved them and their lives. This created a situation where young people distinguished between the information they shared or withheld from certain practitioners.

Young people who perceived some practitioners as 'like a friend'

Young people created boundaries within their interactions with practitioners. However, these were not drawn along the personal and professional divide - akin to those set out in the professional ethics of youth work. There was a different sphere of information that young people were more discerning about sharing. This was information that they did not want to share with everyone and this was akin to practitioners' personal information. Young people shared this socially intimate information with those they considered to be 'like a friend'. Young people distinguished between practitioners they perceived as friends and those they did not, based on certain characteristics. These included: a willingness to really listen and having shared interests which results in wanting more availability to these practitioners:

....you need to be able to speak to them and you need to be able to have them understand you and you understand what they're saying back. You need to have that feedback on what you're saying and stuff like that. I think that's important and that's how I judge a lot of my friends through how they react to me, how they treat me, how I treat them and er... yeah. A lot of my friends are really good friends like I don't have friends- best friends, all mine are best friends... family (James, young person interview, cited in Conradie, 2015).

Young people viewed these practitioners as similar to their other friends and preferred to connect with them through personal profiles. Young people could not see the need for alternative methods of connection in these cases. They did not feel the need to hide any information or experiences from these practitioners. They were comfortable giving these practitioners access to their personal and socially intimate information as shared by them and others on their online profile pages:

Personally I don't really think there is anything wrong with it, but because of the whole law and stuff and yeah... I understand. It doesn't bother me, but if it was... if I hadn't the law and I had that, it wouldn't bother me, because I mean like we're friends, sort of thing. So why can't I add my friend on Facebook? (Cathy, young person interview, cited in Conradie, 2015).

This perception of the practitioner being similar to other friends was identified as a concern by some young people who knew that they were not 'allowed' to connect with practitioners through personal profiles:

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It probably would become less like a working relationship and more like a friendship really. It's depending on how much you interacted with that person online. Because if you chat at night, 'best friend, ra-ra-ra', then it would just, it would completely change it. Wouldn't it? Just a level of friendship (John, young person interview, cited in Conradie, 2015).

Young people understood that some practitioners were not allowed to connect with them through their private profiles and were aware that some youth workers created an additional profile for work purposes. Young people only considered connecting to work profiles in these cases. However, some young people did not want to connect to all practitioners' work profiles. They still only wanted to connect to those that they felt they had developed a 'friendship' type of relationship with. This was because by connecting to a work profile, the young person was still opening up the same level of access to the practitioner as they would have through their personal profile. For the young person, the level of access to the practitioner and the practitioner's life was therefore severely limited; but the practitioner still had full access to the young person's personal and socially intimate information and networked area:

Yeah, but alright we not allowed to see, but it's alright for you to see all of our Facebook's but we not allowed to see yours (Adult volunteer 3, cited in Conradie, 2015).

Where young people connected to practitioners – either through personal or work profiles – they did not want practitioners to 'interfere' or publically 'watch over' them as youth workers. Rather, they wanted practitioners to private message them with any concerns or aspects of a youth work nature. At the time of fieldwork, young people were not keen on using group pages as sending private messages to group members was not possible. This strengthened the notion that one of the key functions of being connected through social network sites was to receive advice and support, if and when needed, through a private space.

Young people felt that practitioners who chose to use work profiles did not trust them. Their perception was that those practitioners did not trust the young people with any of their personal information; but still wanted access to all the young people's information. Where work profiles were the only option available to practitioners to connect, young people saw the benefit, as they could still access the practitioner through the private messaging function when support was needed.

Young people who perceived practitioners as professionals only

The majority of young people saw some practitioners as 'like a friend' and wanted to add them; but they viewed other practitioners as professionals only. This is because of the lack

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of the characteristics identified, willingness to listen and shared interests that leads to wanting to engage more deeply. Therefore the individual relationship that they perceived to have developed with different practitioners determined who they wanted to connect with on social network sites and how.

Young people who felt they had something to hide were not keen to connect with practitioners on social network sites. These young people viewed those practitioners as having a particular professional role and remit and therefore did not want them accessing their online information:

And like the whole police thing is like, it's just... I don't know, it makes you think. It's not about Facebook being Facebook. It's oh, I can't do that. Or someone tags a picture of you drunk, half naked. And then it's like shit! Take that off, because thingy might see it. And then that's underage drinking, report it to the police (John, young person interview, cited in Conradie, 2015).

Discussion

Relationships viewed as professional only by practitioners

Relationships were a determining factor in the decision to connect through social network sites, or not. Most practitioners perceived their relationships with young people within a professional capacity; and therefore attempted to maintain personal and professional boundaries. In the majority of these cases, practitioners could see the value of work profiles and a number of them created these. Various authors in a number of disciplines such as counselling, psychology and nursing suggest the creation of work profiles for professionals to maintain contact between sessions with clients (Bratt, 2010; Witt 2009; Zur et al, 2009).

These profiles were created with line manager consent but outside of existing guidance and policy. For this reason, practitioners were not safeguarding themselves or young people. They created these profiles exactly as they did a personal profile, but added 'youth worker' to their profile name. They did not share information about themselves but used it to share information with young people. Managers were in favour of work profiles but became unsure and 'woolly' when queried about who should be allowed to create these and how they should create these work profiles.

The majority of practitioners felt there was a benefit in creating group pages. However, the vast majority did not want to be responsible for maintaining these pages. This was due to uncertainty about the expectations of the organisation and the relevant procedures. Group pages were perceived as an effective means of sharing information with groups of young people. Group pages were a useful tool to maintain contact and share information

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between youth work sessions. It also allowed for practitioners to maintain their personal and professional boundaries and provided them with an opportunity to treat all young people the same.

Group pages were not identified as a tool to gather information about young people or provide them with private support and advice. However, since the conclusion of the fieldwork, group members are now able to private message each other on Facebook. They still can't view information shared on individuals' profiles and therefore it is still limited as an information gathering tool.

Relationships viewed as 'more than' a professional, work relationship by practitioners

Some practitioners viewed their relationships with young people as 'more than' a work relationship. Most of these practitioners lived and worked in the same geographical spaces, and had done so for a significant period of time. Practitioners, therefore, had a vested interest in the young people and the area (Sercombe, 2007). Multiple relationships existed and in the majority of these cases, the young people were known to them before they became a practitioner. This creates difficulty for youth work providers who might have clear guidance with regards to the nature of relationships between practitioners and young people. Due to the shifts in government priorities, more church-based groups and other voluntary providers are providing youth work services. Universal youth work provision is reliant on volunteers and the vested interest of community members to provide generic youth work. Therefore, can we have expectations about who they can interact with on social network sites? Can we expect practitioners to remove family friends and known young people, due to them taking on a sessional youth work role?

Multiple relationships created blurred boundaries for some practitioners who were community members as well as practitioners. This links with Smith and Fitzpatrick (1995) and Jackson's (2004) assertion that new and innovative ways of working creates heightened potential for boundary crossings. Multiple relationships make it difficult to determine whether boundary crossings or boundary violations are taking place and crossings can develop to violations with time. Bushman and Holt-Lundstad (2009) found that people are reluctant to unfriend others for a variety of reasons. My research found the same with regards to some young people and practitioners' social network site connections; which means that these boundary crossings can endure. This creates additional complications in that the relative safety of the shared youth work ethos are removed, including the potential after care service that this can create for the practitioner. After care service was a result of crossing the boundaries between the personal and the professional. Practitioners who added young people to their personal profiles found that the nature of the relationship remained long after the young people left the youth work setting and were adults. This was also the case for when practitioners move away to work in another area or stop practising altogether. From the practitioners' experiences, they

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continued to be seen as someone in a helping relationship who could provide advice and support. This has far-reaching consequences for practitioners' personal lives and personal engagement on social network sites. They could experience feelings of pressure when they go online, decide to avoid their social network sites or switch their online status to offline. This also means that they are unable to communicate synchronously with other family and friends.

Green and Hannon (2007) suggest there is a delay between technological advancement and policy response. Due to the way that young people and others have embraced social network sites and the speed the technology develops, policy and guidance have been left a step or two behind.

But I think the council didn't realise how big it was going to get and how much of an influence it was gonna have on young people's lives. So actually the guidance took a while to come out as it always does cos obviously it's got to follow it through so I think by the time the guidance came out some areas had already got Facebook pages set up and all that sort of thing and its going kind of how do you then deal with it now (Connexions background practitioner 1, cited in Conradie, 2015).

The delay in policy responses combined with the slowness and difficulty in disseminating these has created varied practices which need addressing. A thoughtful response to these varied practices needs careful consideration in the current state of austerity and reliance on volunteers. This study has not only found a range of practices; but also diversity in how practitioners and line managers perceived they responsibly responded to these practices. Fully informed and realistic decisions need to be made and carried out transparently in order to safeguard and develop not only young people but also practitioners. Due to the fast changing nature of social media and technology, coupled with the changing context of youth work, it is important that line managers stay up to date and ahead of policy, which often takes time to catch up.

Young people who perceived practitioners as 'like a friend'

Young people only wanted to connect with practitioners that were 'like a friend'. In these cases, young people were comfortable with practitioners having access to not only their personal information, but also their more socially intimate information. Young people did not develop these relationships with all practitioners but only with those they felt more connected to. There was a link between the practitioners that young people viewed as 'like a friend' and those who viewed their role as 'more than' a professional relationship. The characteristics that these practitioners adhered to impacted not only on their social media connections with young people but also on their offline encounters with the young people that they worked with.

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Trust was a concern for young people when youth workers opted for work profiles. This was due to the practitioner having access to the young people's online and personal information compared with the practitioner who did not share anything of a personal nature. However, when explained, young people understood that youth work boundaries and practice did not always allow practitioners to connect through personal profiles. In cases like these, practitioners were able to 'hide' behind the policy and guidance as part of institutional trust and maintain their own relationship of mutual trust with the young people. This mutual trust is based on inter-personal trust encapsulated in the relationship between practitioner and young person (Gilson, 2003). Institutional trust refers to the trust that an organisation and its regulating body places in employees and the safeguards that it utilizes to ensure this trust is adhered to (Bachmann and Inkpen, 2011). Young people were not keen on the use of group pages as a means of connecting with youth workers whom they perceived to be 'like a friend'. They viewed group pages similarly to a hall in a youth club – a public space where everything is open and everyone is aware of what you are doing and who you are talking to. This perception is due to the lack of space for private communication on group pages which was not available at the time of fieldwork .

Young people who viewed practitioners as practitioners only

A small minority of young people viewed practitioners as practitioners only. They did not view the relationship to be 'like a friend'. These young people were also sceptical about why practitioners would want to connect with them through personal profiles.

A mismatch?

There is a mismatch between the preferred methods of social media connection of young people and practitioners. This links back to how relationships are viewed and experienced offline. The majority of practitioners viewed their relationships with young people as professional. They aspired to foster similar relationships with all young people by treating them alike. In order of preference, they preferred social network site group pages, then work profiles and would not consider connecting with young people through personal profiles. Where practitioners viewed their relationships with young people as 'more than' professional, their preferred methods of social network site interaction and connection were similar to those of the young people that viewed them as 'like a friend'. They preferred to connect through: personal profiles, then work profiles and lastly group pages.

This issue of how practitioners perceive their relationships with young people and similarly, how young people perceive their relationships with practitioners needs careful consideration; not only for social network site interactions but for youth work in general.

Conclusion

This paper has explored how and why practitioners and young people interconnect on social network sites. A key influence was how the relationship was perceived by both

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parties. Where the relationship was perceived by some practitioners as 'more than' a professional relationship, or 'like a friendship' by some young people, connections through personal profiles was the norm. Practitioners were likely to view their relationships as more than a professional relationship if they lived and worked in the same geographical space for some time. This created the likelihood of multiple relationships and vested interest for those practitioners. If they also worked in another geographical area they tended to cultivate professional relationships. Young people did not view all practitioners as 'like a friend' but only those whom they felt listened to them or with whom they had a shared interest. As a result, some young people wanted to connect with these practitioners outside of youth club time in the same way they might connect with their other friends; social media and personal profiles being one such way. Practitioners and young people were then able to view each other's personal and socially intimate information that would otherwise not be shared within the youth work setting. Such practice could therefore blur the boundaries between personal and professional information sharing.

Where young people did not like a practitioner, or were ambivalent towards them, they did not want to connect with them on social network sites. Practitioners who perceived their role to be professional aimed to maintain their personal and professional boundaries through creating work profiles or considering group pages. However, the same importance was not afforded to young people's boundaries by these practitioners. Work profiles still enabled access to young people's online information. Other means were used, such as client searching and finding out information from other practitioners who were friended, which in turn showed unawareness of young people's own boundaries. As a profession, it is important that practitioners show more awareness towards young people's boundaries and how they perceive their relationships with practitioners.

Due to the changed nature of youth work delivery, careful thought needs to be given to how relationships are perceived by the different parties and the reasons behind them. Practice and policy needs to be aware of these rationales and show sensitivity when dealing with them.

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